

衣笠彰梧

KINUGASA SYOUGO

トモセシユンサク

TOMOSESHUNSAKU

8

ようこそ
実力至上主義
の**教室**へ

ようこそ
じつりょく
しじょうしゅぎ
のきょうしつへ



MF文庫



Youkoso Jitsuryoku Shijou Shugi no
Kyoushitsu e

Welcome to the Classroom of the Know-It-Alls
vol.8

by Kinugasa Syohgo

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8

ようこそ
じつりよく
しじょうしゅぎ
めきようしつへ

ようこそ**実**力**至**上**主**義の**教**室へ

衣笠彰梧 X トモセシュンサク



なぐも みやび
南雲 雅

2年生Aクラスの代表。
新生徒会長だが、行動
や言動は挑発的。

あさひ な
朝比奈なずな

南雲と絡む、2年生
Aクラスの生徒。

きり やま いく と
桐山生叶

2年生Bクラスで生徒
会副会長。南雲に敗れ
クラスはBクラスへと
転落したが、引き続き
生徒会に所属している。

CクラスとDクラスの交流

しい な
椎名 ひより

やま な な み
藪 菜々美

ワン・メイユイ
王 美雨

やま した さ き
山下 沙希





葛城康平

かつらぎ
こうへい



神崎隆二

かんぎし
りゅうじ



龍園翔

りゅうえん
かへる



平田洋介

ひらた
ようすけ



高円寺六助










こうえんじ
ろくすけ



綾小路清隆

あやのこうじ
きよたか

c o n t e n t s

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Prologue: Horikita Manabu's Monologue

There are some things people would find strange if they were to hear about it.

The truth is, I didn't choose this school because I had something I wanted to carry out or anything.

I had lived with the intent of becoming a talented person yet I had no particular destination in mind.

Politician, doctor, researcher, I didn't aim for any of that.

For better or for worse, I've lived my life making sure to not stir anything up. I indifferently complete my assignments and spent my days that way.

Being a 'role model'. Being 'exemplary'.

I believed that to be the right thing to do and never once questioned it.

However, Nagumo Miyabi took one action after another as though to directly oppose me.

A person who cuts their way through, that may how that man can be described.

As a matter of fact, until I graduate, I had already given up on taking action.

I had failed to make a friend I could say I trust from the bottom of my heart.

I have yet to comprehend it.

After 3 years, I've finally realized. My own 'mistake' and the 'regret' it led to. And, that this is the 'beginning'.

Chapter 1: A New Special Exam - Mixed Training Camp

On a Thursday morning not too long after the 3rd semester began, several buses travelled on a highway.

The 1st years weren't the only ones on the buses. The 2nd years and the 3rd years are also on board. In other words, it's a wholesale migration for the entire student body of the school.

The bus that we, the 1st years' Class C, were riding on entered a tunnel and soon afterwards, our ears were assaulted by the sensation of being clogged up.

This is my second time on a bus since enrolling in this school.

Where we're going and what we'll be doing there are things we haven't received the slightest bit of explanation on.

At this stage, all I can tell is that we were all instructed to wear our jerseys and that it is strongly recommended we prepare several spare jerseys and underwear.

However, at the very least it's probably not going to be a field trip.

The travel time is about 3 hours, a rather long travel time, and so within the limits of what's allowed the students brought with them their favourite things.

Things like cell phones, books and cards or snacks and juice.

There were also students amongst them who brought along gaming devices.

Since the seats on the bus were ordered according to our names, it was 'Ike Kanji' who happened to take the seat beside me.

I had intended to get along with him after enrolling but when I realized it, we had become 'only classmates' and our opportunities to hang out drastically decreased.

Even now it's not me, sitting beside him, that he's talking to. He stood on the seat with his knees, turned back, and talked to Sudou and Yamauchi and the others in a loud voice since they were seated far from him.

From time to time, I could hear the girls warning them about their voices being annoying but they don't seem to be paying attention to that.

The bus interior is quite raucous. No wonder they aren't being considerate.

I do feel a bit lonely but there's no helping it.

Fortunately enough, through the exams I was able to befriend students like Keisei and Akito.

We were inside a bus with a harmonious atmosphere about it but I could tell that this won't be a mere picnic.

I may have been able to consider it mere leisure if it had been in the middle of the winter vacation but the 3rd semester is already underway.

In that case, assuming that this is going to be a special exam like it had been with the uninhabited island is best for peace of mind.

However, it's not like Ike and the others haven't matured either. Probably. Chabashira observed the students going about their own business curiously.

Close to my seat and near the driver's seat, she's there just observing the students.

Since it'd be troublesome if our eyes met by any chance, I decided to look out the window.

This is a long tunnel.

It's been roughly 2-3 minutes since we entered the tunnel. Just as I thought that, slowly I could feel my field of vision brightening up.

We had left the tunnel.

As though she had been waiting for that, Chabashira moved.

At the same time, the pain in my ear increased.

"Sorry about cutting your fun short but pipe down".

Chabashira said that to the students while holding a handheld microphone in her hands.

"I thought you lot might like to know where this bus is going and what we'll do then".

"Of course we're curious about that. You're not going to tell me it's the uninhabited island again, are you?".

Receiving Ike's complaint, Chabashira answered.

"Looks like what happened on the uninhabited island is hard to forget for you lot since it's sticking around in your memory. But calm yourselves. An exam of that scale isn't something that can be held frequently. It means we're not cruel enough to force you into that now that summer's over for you lot. However, as you may have already inferred, a new special exam will be held. Your living standards will be extremely high compared to the uninhabited island".

She said that but it's not something particularly trustworthy. Leaving aside the uninhabited island, up until now there have been special exams held that ordinary students would have considered difficult.

Most importantly, a student will be forced to directly confront the pitfall known as expulsion that lurks behind the special exams.

"The special exam that will be demanded from you Class D students from now is!".

She went that far yet Chabashira stopped speaking.

At that moment, my classmates gave little, proud smiles.

Immediately afterwards, Chabashira lowered her head as though in respect and apologized.

"My apologies. You're already students of 'Class C'. Now then, since you've been promoted, I'll explain the details of the special exams to you lot".

Having overcome multiple special exams, the students who have finally made their way up to Class C in the 3rd semester appeared to be accepting their current situation calmly.

The fact that the explanation will take place in the bus means that from this point onwards, it's possible to prepare countermeasures to a certain extent or I'll at least have the chance to do so.

Since we were still in motion, it's forbidden to carelessly get up from your seat but inside the bus, one's voice will easily reach everyone. If you use a phone then it's possible to talk only with a specific person.

Even Ike and the others who are usually very rowdy, immediately stopped to listen to what Chabashira had to say.

Even if it's just this, it still shows that they've grown somewhat.

"From this point onwards, you will be taken to an outdoors school deep in a certain mountain. In all likelihood, we'll arrive at our destination before another hour passes. The shorter the explanation takes the more of a 'grace period' you will have available".

So this means there's approximately one hour to go until the special exam starts.

Even if it takes 20 minutes to conduct the explanation that still leaves 40 minutes. That much time would be left for me to formulate a strategy in regards

to the special exam.

That's probably what she meant by 'grace period'.

"Isn't outdoors school something you attend in the summer?"

The mountains we can see from the highway are still covered in white snow.

A question came forth from Ike, who's an expert when it comes to mountains from his time as a boy scout.

"Can't you keep quiet and listen to me? I believe I've just told you about the 'grace period'".

Chabashira said so more pleasantly than angrily.

Ike apologized and scratched his head.

A brief laughter ensued.

Outdoors school.

Since I haven't heard of that word before I looked it up on my phone.

"Taking place mainly in summer, it commonly takes place on a day with pleasant weather in places like mountains or other locations where greenery is abundant. Collective action is undertaken with the aim of promoting students' health. Also could refer to facilities used for that purpose".

I see. Like Ike said, it usually takes place in the summer. But still, it's not like it absolutely has to take place in that season or anything.

"Opportunities to meet senior students normally.....especially for students not participating in any club activity are limited. But at the outdoors school, we'll be taking collective action that goes beyond school years for 7 nights and 8 days. It's like something beyond even what the sports festival offered. The name of

the special exam that will be taking place is 'Mixed Training Camp'. Since you'll still be anxious if it's just a verbal explanation I'll be distributing the materials now".

Chabashira began walking and handed over a bundle of the materials to the student sitting in the front row seat.

We each took one and passed the rest behind.

The material itself was rather thick and amounted to multiple pages.

Since we weren't instructed in particular not to go ahead and look, I flipped over and looked through it.

There were pictures of what appears to be the training camp properly included.

Rooms where students can sleep, large baths, cafeterias and the such are included.

Seeing all this makes it look fun, or rather, like reading a travel guidebook though.....

But it's inevitable that every important word regarding the special exam we see would make our moods somber.

Even if it's a special exam, there's the relatively thick paper we were handed on top of the verbal explanation.

Even if you think of it as being the same as the explanation for the Paper Shuffle we received not too long ago, this special exam seems like it's shaping up to be something bothersome.

Not too long after, it appears everyone got their hands on the paper. After confirming that, Chabashira continues speaking.

"Feel free to read ahead but I'm going to go ahead with the explanation for the Mixed Training Camp. Since I'll be collecting the materials before you get off the bus, make sure you understand the rules well. I'll be accepting questions at the very end so make sure to shut up and listen. Do you understand that?"

Chabashira said so as she looked at Ike again. Ike made two or three zipping motions over his mouth.

"This time around, the special exam will be a training camp focusing mainly on mental development. In order to accomplish that, we'll start with the ABCs of integrating into society and we'll confirm whether or not you can live in harmony with those you don't interact with commonly. And each and every one of you will learn it".

So would that be the reason why we'll have to take collective action alongside the senior students? Chabashira said so as well but students engaged in club activities will have established relationships between senior students and junior students but even so, most of that will be limited to club activities only.

Students outside of that category will have had absolutely no contact with the senior students and those students aren't a minority by any measure.

Essentially it'd have been great if such exchanges were to be carried out voluntarily without the need to use club activities as an intermediary but it's also a fact that reality isn't that simple.

However, how exactly are they going to involve the senior students in this? Unless contact between us isn't an absolute necessity, then just like during the sports festival, students will probably keep their distance.

Well, we're probably heading over into the mountains for the 'training camp' to ensure that doesn't happen though.....

Either way, as long as the rules for the special exam aren't properly set, it's

easy to figure out loopholes.

There's a massive gap between the 1st years and the 2nd years in terms of physical and mental development.

For teenagers, the period of a year is very significant.

It won't be by that much but we probably won't be able to fight against them on equal terms.

"First off, once you lot arrive at the destination, I'll have you split up based on gender. Then you'll hold a discussion across all school years and then you'll divide yourselves up into six groups".

"Six groups, based on gender.....".

As though to memorize it, Ike muttered to himself beside me.

The explanation has just begun but Chabashira continued on without stopping.

"The lower and upper limits for the number of people in a group have been decided. Look at the fifth page of the material in your hands and have a good look at the patterns for the number of people written down there".

All at once, the students turned their eyes to look at the fifth page of the material. It appears the rules pertaining to the groups in the training camp are written there.

"When establishing a group, there's both a lower and an upper limit to the number of people that can be in it. That number has been calculated from the separation of boys and girls as well as the school years. For instance:

- If there are 60 boys in the same school year then 8-13.

- If there are 70 boys in the same school year then 9-14.
 - If there are 80 boys in the same school year then 10-15.
- will be the lower and upper limits for a group.

However, if the number is below 60 then please refer to the special section.

That was written there.

If there is no difference in the ratio of boy to girl across school years then in theory one class should have 40 and if the ratio of boys to girls is 5:5, then the total number of boy for the 1st year would be 80.

10-15 would form one group and in total, six groups would be formed.

The fact that they referred to the total number of students means that depending on the number of expulsions for the entire school year, the amount of people required would change as well.

"I think you're already aware of it but the fact that the division into six is based on gender means that you'll have students from other classes mixed in when the groups form. Also, for the duration of the outdoors school, you'll have to overcome the special exam with that group. It means your fates are tied to one another".

"It's unreasonable to ask us to form a group with guys from other classes. Aren't they the enemy?".

Perhaps he couldn't stand to keep quiet any longer, as Ike muttered that so Chabashira could hear.

But maybe he struck on a good idea, as he then spoke as though a light bulb had been lit above his head.

"Is that so? Then we don't really have to care about that, right? We can simply divide ourselves, Class C, into two groups and that'll be the end of that. That's what it means, right? Ayanokouji".

Ike asked me that in a loud voice.

Certainly, it's possible to go with the lower limit of 10 to form two Class C groups and this problem can be solved that way. However, that idea of Ike's unfortunately won't fly.

"That sounds good but things won't be that simple. The rules don't permit a group to be formed from just one class alone. As long as the number of people in your group meet the quota it doesn't matter which class you team up with but at the very least, there needs to be two classes or more mixed together".

That statement of Chabashira's also happened to be properly written under the heading of dividing up people.

"Each group must have students from at least two or more classes as a prerequisite".

"Do you mean we'll be forced to work together with the enemy?".

It's not so much a question but more along the line of words that unexpectedly leaked out of Ike.

Chabashira, looking slightly exasperated, replied.

"That would be what it means. Of course, it's not impossible to try and form a group composed of students from your class as much as possible. As long as there's even a single student from another class then you'll have formed it after all".

In short, make two groups and go with the lower limit of 10 people. And of

those, 9 would be from Class C. If we do so, we can form a group that's 'mostly Class C'.

However, I doubt a group like that will be acknowledged by all school years when the discussion takes place.

There aren't many students who'd join a group that's made up mostly of people from another class. Also, would having more people be better? Or having less people be better? And if it will change or not?

If this is an exam where advantages and disadvantages can occur based on the difference between the number of people in each group then having a group with few people would be risky.

But since the conditions of the exam aren't clear yet it's impossible to judge the merits and demerits of the number of people.

Whether it be luck or misfortune will depend on the essence of this exam.

"Is it better for a group to have many people? Or few people? That will have a significant impact on the 'outcome' I am going to explain now".

Saying that, Chabashira laughed lightly.

It's easy to figure out since everyone's thoughts were pointed in the same direction.

"Could you please continue with the explanation of the rules? I'm curious about the outcome but first I'd like to know what sort of things we'll be doing as a group".

Hirata, who felt uneasy, said so and urged Chabashira to continue.

"That's right. If I answer every single one of Ike's doubts we won't make any progress".

Ike apologetically scratched his head.

"The groups will be something akin to temporary classes formed for the outdoors school only. However, even if it's only temporary, the contents of it will be intense. Members of a group will take lessons together, will cook and wash together and will even bathe and go to bed together. You will experience daily life of all different kinds together".

If they knew that they'd be taking baths and going to bed together, both boys and girls alike would scream.

"I don't feel like I can live together with folks from other classes---.....".

I can understand why Ike would grumble like that.

We did cooperate with another class during the sports festival, but that was a temporary thing.

It can hardly be said that we went through thick and thin together.

By the way, after coming here, we were about to take part in an exam that would cross class boundaries.

Depending on the circumstances, we may yet form a group that has all four classes mixed in it.

"How the outcome of the special exam will be decided, that will depend on a comprehensive exam that will take place on the last day of outdoor school. A rough idea of the exam's contents are written on the page 7. Go through it".

We were told to do such, and inevitably everyone checked it simultaneously.

"Morals" "Mental Discipline" "Order" "Individuality"

Subjects we would never have to learn in an ordinary school were lined up there.

In other words, I should view this as an exam separate from things like English and mathematics, which fall under academic ability.

The troublesome thing is, there is no 'clear answer' in an exam like this.

There is information on each subject in the materials we were given but they are all abstract.

There's nothing about how exactly, in detail, the exam will be conducted.

Furthermore, I looked at a sample schedule. After we wake up, we'd work on our morning assignments. Then we'd gather at the dojo for Zazen and then we'd go to work (such as cleaning).

Then we eat breakfast.

Afterwards, we'll study various things in a classroom. After that, we eat lunch.

We then receive assignments for the afternoon and once again we practice Zazen.

Then we'd have dinner and a bath and go back to bed. It's an entirely different lifestyle from the one we've lived up until now.

By the way, unlike our usual holidays, lessons will be held throughout the morning on Saturdays.

It appears we'll only be able to rest on a Sunday.

"More details on your schedule will be announced upon arrival at the outdoors school. What kind of special exam will take place and in what order on the last day is also something I cannot tell you at this stage".

It means that we'll have to play it by ear for the duration of the special exam.

It could be that the subject they listed as 'Zazen' will also be a part of the exam.

It would be best if I assumed little things like posture and attitude will also influence the exam.

Other than that, words like 'speech' and 'fabrication' are also disturbing signs.

"Deciding your groups is of utmost importance. All six groups must be as one and must be capable of overcoming a week of the camp. No matter what the reason may be, you are not allowed to withdraw from your group halfway through or change members. If a student is forced to retire from either sickness or injury, then the group must deal with that gap on their own by assuming 'that student exists'".

In other words, if there's discord between us or if we antagonize one another, then we won't be able to proceed. More and more it's starting to look like on top of forming our groups, we'll also have to eliminate the other classes.

Full-scale lessons will start on Friday morning, that's tomorrow, and until Wednesday next week there will be lessons held at the outdoor school.

And also, on the 8th day which will be a Thursday, all school years will take an exam simultaneously and we will be graded.

"After the 1st years have established their groups, they will rendezvous with the 2nd and 3rd years who will have established their groups at the same time. In short, it means six groups will have formed numbering around 30 to 45 people composed of 1st years up to 3rd years".

The situation's already a chaotic one having to form groups amongst fellow 1st years, but other school years will be added to the mix as well.

As soon as that fact was conveyed, a strange atmosphere came over the bus interior.

"If I have to put it simply, the groups you'll be forming with your school year are the small groups and the groups that will be formed from all school years

will be the large groups".

Each and every group we form from our school year will be 'small groups'. The small groups will rendezvous with small groups from the 2nd years and the 3rd years and ultimately we'll end up as six 'large groups'.

"Now moving onto the important topic: the outcome. That will depend on the 'point averaged' from the exam results of every member in the six, large groups. It means the talents of the other school years will also play an important role".

Basically, an average point will be calculated from all 40 people making up a large group.

What worries me is the difference in the number of people.

If it's an average point we're talking about, even though it should be hard for inequality to creep in, depending on how the small groups are assembled there could be a considerable difference in the number of people once we form a large group.

The crucial thing here is 'how to form a large group'.

If this is an exam where we'd simply have to compete against one another in terms of academic ability then it's obvious the large group where all the talented students have gathered will win.

Conversely, students judged talentless will inevitably be chased out of the top groups and will have to form low ranking groups.

However, it's not like you're guaranteed to win out in this special exam just by gathering talented students.

"You've gotten the gist of it to a certain extent, haven't you? Then now for last, I'll be explaining the most important thing here. That is, to say, the result of this special exam's outcome".

So basically what we'll stand to gain and what we stand to lose, huh?

Once again, the reason why we're divided based on groups and not classes should be hidden here.

"For large groups whose average points put them in 1st place through 3rd place, all their students will receive private points as well as class points. For large groups that come in at 4th place all the way down to last place, let's just say you'll receive a demerit".

The details regarding the outcome was, of course, also written on the materials we were given.

"Basic Rewards".

1st Place: 10,000 private points. 3 class points.

2nd Place: 5000 private points. 1 class point.

3rd Place: 3000 private points.

The aforementioned rewards will be distributed to each and every student.

If in a small group of 10, 9 happened to be from the same class, they will stand to gain 27 class points by coming in at 1st place.

Of course it's only describing an ideal scenario but it would be for the best if we could collect students from the same class to the utmost of our ability and come in at 1st place.

However, the more people we have, the greater the damage we'll sustain should we lose. Furthermore, if the number of people increases, the more

difficult it will become to control the group.

By the way, the minus factors that concern me hold far more weight than the few plus factors there are.

4th Place: 5000 private points.

5th Place: 10,000 private points. 3 class points.

6th Place: 20,000 private points. 5 class points.

The aforementioned points will be deducted from each and every student.

Private points and class points won't fall below zero but it'll remain behind as cumulative deficit and it'll be calculated out whenever we receive rewards in future exams.

It can be said that this is an element that hadn't been present up until now.

The reason why one would feel the rewards for 1st place through to 3rd place are somewhat lacking is because there's a huge trick behind it.

On the subject of rewards, this sentence was written down. Chabashira went ahead and read it out.

"It's set up such that depending on how many of a particular class is present in a small group, the reward may be doubled. On top of that, the more people there are making up a small group, it will be amplified even further. These are rules that apply for 1st place through to 3rd place and this won't apply for the deduction for 4th place and below so relax".

If two classes make up a small group then 1st place through to 3rd place will be rewarded as aforementioned but if it's composed of three classes then both those points will double. If it's composed of four classes then it will triple.

Furthermore, since the amplification appears to change depending on the total number of people, 10 people would cause it to be multiplied by 1, 15 people would cause it to be multiplied by 1.5 at most.

This would be an exception but if a group should be formed with 9 people in it then it would be multiplied by 0.9 in that case.

According to calculations, the greatest reward for taking 1st place would be triple if students from all four classes are present and in addition, for a group with the maximum number of 15 it would be multiplied by 1.5 (rounded to the nearest integer) and each person would receive 45000 private points as well as 14 class points.

So far, this covers the good parts of the special exam and a troublesome yet interesting part also exists.

However, you could say that what's truly important is what comes after this.

"Also, the large group that comes in at last place will incur a massive penalty".

"Penalty.....it can't be".

"That's right. It's 'expulsion'".

That penalty, which in itself is no longer a surprise, was revealed.

"Still, it's not like we're going to expel everyone in the large group that places last. Because if we did that then we'd have approximately 40 expelled students on our hands. The criteria by which the expulsion will occur is limited to only the small groups whose average point falls below the borderline average point set forth by the school".

This is a rather troublesome setup. The overall ranking will be calculated from the average points of the large groups yet when it comes to expulsion, it's the

average point of the small group that matters.

"If a small group should happen to fall below that border, then their 'leader' will be expelled".

"How exactly will that leader be chosen?".

"You will discuss it within your small group in advance and elect one. That's it".

"What the hell? Who the hell would want to be the leader when expulsion's on the table".

Going forward, I wonder just how many students would volunteer.

"There are upsides to it too. Students who are classmates of the leader will receive double the reward".

"...double, you say?".

Horikita, who had been silent up until now, muttered in surprise.

"That's right. The greatest reward for this special exam would be consolidated by the 12 students from Class C within the group. And the remaining 3 will be drawn from A, B and D each. On top of that, if the leader happens to be someone from Class C and you manage to take 1st place then.....".

"W-What'll happen then?".

Yamauchi, unable to perform the calculations, rubbed his nose excitedly.

"1.08 million private points. 336 class points. Is what you stand to gain".

"T-Three hundred and thirty six!".

If we acquire that then in one stroke, our class will change significantly.

It depends on the score the other groups receive but it's not impossible to rise up to Class A in this exam.

The more risks you take, the greater the rewards.

Moreover, the chances of receiving that greatest reward aren't low by any measure.

"After the small group has been established, you'll need to discuss amongst yourselves and decide on a leader before daybreak of the next day. If, by any chance, you are unable to decide on a leader for your group then your group will be immediately disqualified. In other words, all of you will be forcibly expelled. Of course, there haven't been a single group in the past so foolish as to be unable to decide on a leader and be expelled".

So the school won't be the ones deciding. It's something that's up to the students to decide for themselves.

Naturally, we'd end up quarrelling while attempting to decide on a leader. However, if by the end there still aren't any candidates, then we'd have no other choice but to decide it with a lottery or a game of rock-paper-scissors.

It's inevitable considering everyone would know that they could be expelled.

In a situation where it's already going to be difficult bringing it together as one, there's also a high possibility that the unity of the group will be a doubtful one.

"Also, if the leader is to be expelled, they can choose another person from their group to bear joint responsibility and be expelled alongside them. You could say it's sort of like dragging them down with you".

"H-Huh? What's with that? That's fucked up! By appointing some random guy as leader, does it mean we'd be able to crush the leaders of the other classes that way?"

I doubt something like that can be accomplished this easily.

If we're going to be electing a leader then we naturally we should select and screen him to a certain extent.

A student who's clearly a throwaway pawn won't simply be made the leader. If such a thoughtless act were to be allowed then that's on the group.

There aren't any students who'd be willing to self-destruct for the sake of their comrades and drag a student from another class down with them in the first place.

It'd be a different story if that student happened to be chained down in Class D and already harbored thoughts of dropping out anyways but information about students like that will probably spread around anyways.

"Relax, it's not like just about anyone can be made to bear joint responsibility. Only students who are a contributing factor to the group falling below the border, as judged by the school, will be liable for that. Like deliberately failing or boycotting the exam, unless you do such things there'll be no problem".

Certainly if that's the case then you could say that both the leader and their group members are well protected. However, for this exam, one can't help but doubt the way the leader ought to be.

Things are different this time around compared to previous special exams.

What I should focus on is the fact that the assignments for this special exam will be shared across all school years.

And that the same explanation is probably being given right now on the other buses as well.

I need to assume that right now, at this very moment, all sorts of strategies are being laid out.

Not just the 1st years but also the 2nd years fighting their own 2nd year fight and the 3rd years fighting their own 3rd year fight.

To clear up my doubts, I sent a message to a certain man.

Because I wanted to know whether or not the 'student council' has a hand in

this special exam.

"One more important thing, the expellee's class will be receiving a proportionate penalty as well. The details of the penalty change depending on the exam but for this special exam, in the case of expulsion, 100 points per person will be deducted. In the case of class points being insufficient, it will be calculated out over time. Until then, it will naturally remain zero".

The magnitude of the consequences remain the same as before but the minus is a substantial deduction.

Yet another essence of this exam.

The selling point of being a leader is that the points to be gained would double but on the other hand, they'll have to accept the risk that is expulsion.

Unless they're allocated to a group that they're confident will do fine, there wouldn't be a single person willing to raise their hand.

However, they won't be able to hand over such a perfect opportunity to the other classes either.

On top of that, there's also the joint responsibility to consider.

Rules that are like blind alleys have been set.

"And with that, the explanation ends. I'll be accepting questions".

Hirata immediately raised his hand.

"If an expulsion occurs.....is there any way to extend a lifeline?".

"If you're expelled, you're expelled. Nothing to be done about it, right?".

Such words came from Sudou. But Hirata denied them.

"That's not true. As a matter of fact, Sudou-kun was almost expelled once by Chabashira-sensei. But thanks to Horikita-san's quick-wittedness you were

saved. Just like that, it'd be strange if there isn't anything we can do".

Hirata got it right.

Chabashira answered with a smile.

"That's right. As a last resort, you can buy a 'cancellation of expulsion' with private points but of course, the price will be high you know? Cancellation of expulsion.....in other words, as a general rule a 'lifeline' will be equally in demand by all school years. To extend a lifeline to a single person, 20 million private points and a further 300 class points must be paid. This is, at most, just a lifeline and the penalty that will be incurred upon expulsion won't be waived. Of course, if either of the points required happen to be insufficient then you cannot use a lifeline".

A lifeline that requires a tremendous amount of private points isn't something you could possibly pay for.

For the current exam, a minimum of '400' class points are the prerequisite for a lifeline.

Students who are disposed of via expulsion probably won't be bailed out in the first place.

Because in order to save one, the entire class would be losing a great sum.

"That 20 million points you talked about, it doesn't matter even if the entire class pitches in for it right?".

However, Hirata has considered a future where he might have to use that lifeline and did not neglect to check.

"That's exactly right. But this has nothing to do with you lot since you don't have that much either way".

Chabashira concludes the document.

"There isn't much time left until we reach our destination. How you choose to

utilize this time is up to you. Once we arrive, I will be collecting the materials I've handed out. Also, the use of cell phones will be forbidden for a week. I'll be confiscating them soon. Other than that, you're free to bring along daily necessities and gaming equipment but you won't be allowed to bring along foodstuff. Things that cannot be stored long term, such as meat, will have to be either eaten before arrival or thrown away in the garbage bag upon alighting. That is all".

Students who did not give much of a reaction to the explanation of the special exam raised their voices at that.

Although they've already experienced the same thing on the uninhabited island, it must be difficult having your phone confiscated for a week.

"I have a question!".

Ike excitedly raised his hand. Chabashira gives a bitter smile.

"You said boys and girls will be separated but exactly how far apart will we be?".

"There are two buildings at the outdoor school. The main building will be used by the boys and the other one will be used by the girls. The buildings are next to one another but in theory, you will be living apart from each other for a week. You won't be allowed to go outside without permission during recess and after school either".

"So that means we won't be able to talk to one another?".

"No, each day for an hour at the cafeteria in the main building, both boys and girls will have their meals together. It's only within that period that the school won't issue any instructions. In other words, you're free to do whatever you want then. Do you understand?".

"Yes!".

Perhaps he's just that happy to be able to talk to girls, as Ike rejoiced.

I got up a bit and turned to look at Shinohara, who's sitting nearby. As I did, I noticed that despite looking exasperated, she appeared somewhat happy to hear Ike's words.

Perhaps that Christmas dinner worked out.

"If there aren't any more questions then I'll be ending this".

Maybe she decided that only silly questions would be forthcoming as Chabashira wrapped things up immediately.

"Sensei. May I borrow your microphone?".

As Chabashira tried to wrap things up, it was Hirata who cut her short.

"Of course, do you as wish".

Chabashira said so as she let go of the microphone and took her seat.

Hirata slowly came forward to replace her and took the microphone into his hands.

"From what sensei said, it doesn't look like we have much time but first of all, I'd like to hear everyone's opinion. On how to overcome this exam. What sort of partition we should aim for in groups".

"For something like that, wouldn't it be best if we could get as much of our classmates in it as possible? We select our best and form a small group of 12 and the rest we can bring it one from each of the other classes. Ain't that perfect?".

Sudou said that to Hirata.

"That would be ideal but I wonder if those 3 students from other classes would be willing to join our small group of 12. They'd naturally be on their guard".

It'd be a group shamelessly aiming to win.

I don't think students from other classes would join one after another at our convenience.

And also, if that group fails to get 1st place then the damage we'd receive would be considerable as well.

"But---. If the smart ones end up forming a group then we'd lose all chances of winning".

Yamauchi muttered that.

It appears he still hasn't realized that it's not our academic ability that's being tested this time.

"We'd also like a chance to obtain private points for ourselves".

It's understandable that Yamauchi would complain. This was a problem that came up a while back during the exam on the cruise as well.

The large group at the top will gain private points but for the students at the bottom, there'd be no profit.

On the contrary, they'd lose their private points. If so, then a lot of students would understandably want to be allocated to the winning group.

"In regards to that, if everyone consents to it then I'd like to go with a way that allows for equal distribution. We don't know which large group will come out on top. Once the exam is underway, and we can confirm that private points will increase for the entire class, then we can divide them up between ourselves. Since transfer of points is permitted there shouldn't be a problem".

Even if we get points deducted, if everyone shares the burden then the risk would also decrease.

"Ohh, I see. There's that".

Of course that makes it easy for the talented students to complain though but

it's also easy to come to a consensus in this special exam.

What the deciding factor will be is still a mystery.

"Fufu.....".

Having heard Hirata propose his plan, Chabashira turned away and laughed.

"I wasn't able to answer before since you lot didn't ask me any questions but as a reward for your promotion to Class C I'll give you just one, good advice".

"Advice?".

Rather than obediently accept the reward, Hirata showed caution.

"Whenever you aren't bound by the rules, you're free to transfer private points. Whether it be in the middle of the exam or during your daily life, as long as it's within legal boundaries, you can transfer them however you please. Just one thing, private points aren't the same thing as simple pocket money. Keep that in mind".

"By that, do you mean that while saving up 20 million points, it's possible to transfer to any class of your choosing? Or is this about the lifeline?".

"That's not what I meant. There are various ways to use private points. Even a single, extra point saved could make all the difference when it comes to the lifeline is what I mean. Doesn't always mean that getting along and sharing points and supporting one another is the right thing to do you know? For instance, let's say Ike made a mistake and he'll be expelled unless a million points are paid right away. Let's assume you've fallen into this predicament. And if a transfer isn't allowed right then and there and he'd be expelled unless he has a million private points on hand, what'll you do then? If you adopt the strategy of sharing equally amongst yourselves, you may be doing something you cannot take back".

Having heard his name be used as an example, I could hear Ike gulping beside me.

"Besides, when that happens, there's no guarantee the other students will save you. Because it may yet be they themselves who fall into a predicament next. The only one capable of protecting you would be you yourself".

Chabashira gave advice as though trying to say the strategy of sharing evenly amongst ourselves is a mistake.

It may be advice we should be grateful for but now it'll prove difficult to unite the class.

"The ones who work hard will be rewarded with success. That much is common knowledge in society. Once you enter society, someone benevolent enough to share their salary and bonuses with their friends would be a rare case even amongst the rare cases.

Now that you know this, what you do from this point onwards is up to you, Chabashira said so as she laughed.

In all likelihood, what Chabashira said just now is true.

I don't think a teacher of this school would stir things up just because there isn't a precedent.

Because every day, she speaks in perfect accordance with the manual. However, there's an underside to this.

There probably have been cases where individuals have saved up private points but conversely, there have been people saved because their classmates have been saving up a great sum of points.

As for how I know this, it's because in the past, Horikita and I supplied the private points for a nearly-expelled Sudou as a third party and that set a precedent.

Ultimately, sharing it evenly amongst ourselves can still be a preventative measure against unforeseen incidents.

By giving an individual such a great sum of money, you run the risk of them misappropriating it and a betrayal is also very possible.

Chabashira said something disruptive towards her own class. Of course, I can't reject the possibility that it's merely school policy but.....

"Shall we put it to a majority vote then? It's not like we'll decide through that but rather, I'd like to know what everyone thinks after hearing that just now. Can the people who'd prefer to share evenly amongst ourselves during the special exam from now on please raise your hands? Of course, I don't mind even if you change your mind later".

Hirata raised his own hand and became the first one to do so.

Most of the students were troubled by that and they could only raise their hands bit by bit.

It is important to be united as one class and help one another but when it comes down to it, it's also crucial that you prepare insurance in case you're the one being disposed of.

Once again, it appears most of the students have saved only a few ten thousand or hundred thousand private points.

In that case, there'll be quite a few students who will have enough points saved up for emergencies if only then can place 1st.

The students who aren't confident in themselves are the ones who'd wish the most for an equal share. There were more of them than expected but in the end, the number of raised hands wasn't even half the class.

"Thank you".

It means the majority of the class does not wish for an equal sharing of the points.

However, now that it's become like this even Hirata, who's from the equal sharing faction, won't be able to prod things in that direction that easily anymore.

"Was it unnecessary advice, Hirata?"

"No, I'm grateful for it. It's valuable information for us at this stage".

My phone vibrated once. I thought 'he' had replied and took my phone out but it turned out that it was a message from the Horikita 'sister'.

I already guessed it but it had to do with this special exam.

"Do you have any ideas?"

A sentence that left everything to me.

"None whatsoever".

I replied with just that.

But, I reconsidered just a bit and decided to send just one more thing.

"This exam will separate boys and girls. I cannot help with anything, please do your best".

I decided to give such a cheerleading shout. Horikita probably has a lot of things she'd like to say to me but it's impossible to do so here.

I quickly concluded my chat with Horikita and checked yet another chat group that's currently active.

It's the chat for the Ayanokouji Group (I don't mean to brag or anything though).

Keisei and Akito as well as Airi and Haruka were merrily discussing the exam away.

I had already read it but I closed it without making any comments in particular.

And so I listened to Hirata and the others' conversation.

"There isn't enough time to formulate a strategy. Besides, if boys and girls will have to form groups away from one another then it'll be difficult enough just advising each other".

"No way.....".

Looking at it from the girls' perspective, they would no longer be able to ask Hirata, the man they could always depend on, for help.

It's understandable they'd feel uneasy.

"Since we boys won't be able to lend you a hand, I think the girls should decide on a clear leader. Can you take on that role, Horikita-san?"

Hirata must have been thinking of this ever since he heard the explanation for the exam.

He pinned a white arrow on that lone girl, Horikita.

Of course, Horikita is about the only one who could play this role in our class.

"Very well. I don't mind, consult me anytime if there's something troubling you".

Horikita replied like that without showing any displeasure. However, even though Horikita is gradually becoming someone our classmates can depend on, their level of trust in her is still a far cry from Hirata's.

But if it's Horikita as she is right now, she'll understand that herself too.

"However, there should be quite a few girls who feel like I won't be reliable enough alone. I don't like to say this about myself but I don't think I have a personality that lends itself well to a consultation".

It really isn't something one would like to say about themselves.

"That's why I'd like Kushida-san to help me as a sub-leader. What do you say?".

Horikita said so towards Kushida, who sat towards the front.

"W-Will I even be of use?".

"Of course you will. You are trusted more than anyone else in this class".

"Umm.....ok. If you're ok with me then I'll cooperate".

"Thank you. Now it'll be a lot easier for the others to ask for consultation. If you find it difficult to talk to me directly then I don't mind it if you do so via Kushida-san. I'll respond to any consultation, no matter how trivial".

Leaving aside the extent to which Kushida is trustworthy, it's an unmistakable fact that this is the best approach right now.

Because of the rules of this exam, it's considerably difficult for boys and girls to meddle with each other's affairs.

First of all, it's impossible for a boy to join in on the fight at the girls' side.

Both the lessons we'll be receiving and the exam we'll be taking, despite being in the same facility, will be taking place at different locations.

The only time we can make contact is during the one hour we have for dinner.

More so if our phones, which we could use for regular contact, will be confiscated.

Still, it's essential that we gather as much information as possible.

In that case, I'll need accomplices to help me gather information from the girls. Within our class, Kushida's movements are also slightly worrying.

The only two I can use would have to be either Horikita or Kei. The former's currently stuck in a rather troublesome situation. Also, I need to take into account her overthinking my intentions and taking unnecessary action as well.

Most importantly, if she's being consulted by the other girls then she won't have room to do other things as well.

Therefore, as expected, the only one I can use would have to be Kei.

But I cannot possibly force Kei to see through the entire group alone.

I sent the essential facts over to Kei's phone.

The mail arrived and was immediately seen by Kei, who replied with a blank mail.

Boys and girls will be fighting a battle while separated for an extended period of time.

A unique special exam was about to begin and it appears she had instantly assumed I'd contact her.

Kei herself might want some advice right about now.

Considering the leader and joint responsibility system, it's not impossible to think that even Kei may end up becoming a sacrifice.

In regards to her attitude during lessons and her exam scores, I cannot say that Kei is doing well, even as flattery.

That's why I'll teach her how to protect herself.

It isn't something every student will be able to pull off but it's a way to lower the risk even if just a little.

As for me, I couldn't care less about the special exam that's going to be held really.

I have no intention of executing winning strategies. I'm just going to overcome it safely.

Still, just like how I'm giving Kei advice, it doesn't mean I won't be making a move at all.

The worst case scenario in the special exam would be multiple expulsions occurring in Class C.

And it's impossible to perfectly protect the whole class by myself.

I have to narrow down the people I need to protect.

In short, other than myself, I'd like to protect Kei, who has finally become a prominent accomplice as well as Hirata.

Next up, considering my involvement with the student council, I'll need to make sure Horikita survives as well.

Then there are also my friends Keisei, Akito, Haruka and Airi. It's just, while I wish for them to remain, they won't be under my protection. However, as a friend, I will definitely pray for them not to get expelled.

Even though there won't be many opportunities for all the school years to gather together, it should be fine if I just kept an eye on Nagumo's movements.

I have no interest in the skirmishes that will occur around me.

The bus left the highway and began to gradually ascend the mountain road that's paved to a certain extent. I wonder if it's become a custom for us to go to the ocean or to rivers or places surrounded by nature whenever we leave the school.

N/T: 'Zazen' is a type of meditation that has its roots in Zen Buddhism.

1

Anyway, upon arrival, the special exam will begin.

Judging from how they confiscated our cell phones, it appears this is a troublesome exam where you'd have to either gather information yourself or utilize your personal connections.

However, since the more carelessly you act, the more information is leaked, utmost discretion is demanded of us.

"I'm not cut out for this.....".

My honest mutters.

No matter how many special exams I've been through already, I still haven't gotten used to them one bit.

Throughout my life, I've seldom ever cooperated with others.

"We will be arriving at our destination soon. Immediately afterwards, we will have you form groups indoors. And then afterwards, depending on whether or

not you've finished partitioning your rooms, you'll have lunch. Throughout the afternoon you'll all be free to do whatever you want".

"That means.....hooray! That means we don't have to study today right?".

Ike happily looked towards me and laughed.

That's probably going to be the case. However, unlike during summer vacation, today is a non-holiday.

Despite the long transit time, isn't this a kind of special treatment? It's not that different from a field trip.

Upon arriving at the destination, the bus slowed down and drove towards the parking lot before stopping.

"Students will hand in their cell phones when their names are called and alight from the bus. Ayanokouji, Ike---".

Chabashira performed a roll call of the boys in syllabary order while having them start alighting from the bus.

I turned off my phone and placed it inside the plastic box set beside our teacher.

Upon alighting, an unfamiliar teacher approached. And we were then instructed to wait a slight distant away from the bus.

"Ahh---it's cold!".

After alighting from the bus, Ike hugged himself and shouted. Perhaps it's because we're in the mountains?

It's colder than it was when we had left the school. However, a spectacle unfolded before our eyes that almost made us forget the cold for a moment.

"Wow.....what's this place? This isn't on the scale of a mere outdoors school.....".

Before us lay a wide, open space that resembled the school grounds. And behind that were two old-fashioned school buildings.

In order to accomodate all three school years, their size was also considerable.

It appears we'll be spending a week here.

It was the same too during our time on the uninhabited island but I'm really not used to living amongst nature like this.

Considering how this may be an exam that's related to such things, Ike, who had been a boy scout, could be useful.

In addition, taking physical strength into account, Sudou's presence is also reassuring.

The girls were also alighting one after another. Horikita, upon alighting, seemed like she wanted to talk to me but unfortunately, we were already lining up and as such, that proved to be impossible.

Boys and girls were then split up and we each headed over to the school building. The boys to the larger one, which is what they call the main building.

Once we stepped inside the building, the somehow familiar scent of timber tickled our noses.

"It's an old-fashioned wooden building. It seems to be several years old but it looks pretty well maintained. It's really beautiful".

Hirata said so but it appears everyone else agrees with him as well.

Along the way, in a room that appears to be a classroom of some sort, there was no air-conditioning installed but rather a stove had been placed at the center of it.

Probably starting from tomorrow, we'll have lessons in classrooms like that

one.

We then passed by what appears to be a gymnasium.

The boys from Class A and Class B arrive and they looked in our direction.

Afterwards, Class D entered and next up would probably be the 2nd and 3rd years.

We were instructed to form a line, stand still and wait for further instructions.

Class A, and Class B too, appeared calm and did not chat amongst themselves. I should assume they've already come up with some sort of strategy on the bus.

2

The boys from across all school years assembled in the gymnasium. Feeling uncomfortable, the 1st years immediately assembled and awaited further instructions without making a fuss.

Not too long afterwards, someone who looked like the teacher of a different school year stood up on a stage with a microphone in hand and spoke to the students.

"I'll assume you've all received prior explanation in the bus regarding the contents of this exam and that you've digested it. As such, there will be no further explanation of it here. Now then, we'll be forming our small groups here so I'll have you set aside time for this. Each school year will hold a discussion in order to create six small groups. Furthermore, as for the formation of the large groups, it'll take place at 8 pm today. That's all. This is supplementary information but when it comes to partitioning the groups, irrespective of size, the school will not interfere. And we will not act as arbitrators either".

Instructions for the boys to do as they wish were conveyed. Before we form

the large groups, we'll need to start with the small groups.

Alright then, I wonder what sort of the strategy the other classes will go with and what objectives will they be aiming for. They should have, to a certain extent, already come up with a strategy on the bus but let's see.

Each school year took their distance and inside the gymnasium, we began to partition ourselves into groups. I'm curious about the movements of the other school years but from this distance I won't be able to ascertain the finer details.

As I casually observed the senior students like that, the partitioning of groups commenced and before even a few seconds had passed, there was movement from within the 1st year classes.

I thought we'd be sounding each other out for a while longer but Class A blatantly started forming a massive group.

A most conspicuous action considering the stalemate we're locked in. Inevitably, they drew attention from their surroundings.

Eventually, Class A formed a single group consisting of 14 people. And then they made this declaration to Class B and below, that is to say, us.

"As you can see, we Class A intend on forming a group with these members. And as you can see, right now we number 14. If one more person were to join us, we'd meet the prerequisite number. Now then, we're looking for people willing to join us".

The one who said that was a student from Class A named Matoba.

Katsuragi was also among the 14 that had gathered but the one leading them was the boy named Matoba.

So does this mean Katsuragi isn't the group's leader? Either way, from the start, Class A played the hand of forming a group made up of their own as much as possible.

"Oi, oi. Why the hell are you guys getting ahead of yourselves? It's unfair if you're the only ones in it".

Sudou angrily glares at Matoba.

"Is it really that selfish of us? If we go with our proposal, each group will be composed of, at most, students from two classes. Even if we're 1st place, the bonus we'll get won't be that significant either. I don't feel like this is a greedy proposal that favors only Class A".

"N-No but I mean, it's unfair that there's 14 of you".

"That's not true. On the contrary, it's fair. The remaining three classes can create three groups consisting of 15. In other words, wouldn't it be fine if you form groups just like ours?".

"Is that so?".

Sudou, who didn't quite understand what Matoba is saying, turned around and looked at Hirata.

"That would be the case, yes".

"If you understand then this makes things go quicker. By the way, the remaining 6 from Class A are willing to join your groups in whatever form you see fit".

How does that sound? Matoba smiled as he looked at Hirata.

He looked at Class B's Kanzaki and Shibata the same way as well.

"Umm---.....let's see, I do believe this isn't a bad deal. What about you, Kanzaki?".

"Sorry but I can't give an immediate reply".

"Of course---. I don't believe the remaining six from Class A will go as far as to

pull the legs of the other groups on purpose though. But I guess we'd be cautious after all".

Class A tried to decide on the groups right away. However, Kanzaki did not make an immediate decision but rather, tried to put their proposal on hold.

However, in response to that, Matoba fiercely cut in.

"In that case I'll give you 5 minutes. Please make your decision by then".

"A time limit, huh? The group partitioning's only just begun. This is only Class A's personal opinion, it's no good if you onesidedly decide on this. Don't you think it's outrageous that you'd only postpone it by 5 minutes?".

Even if you could say every class would be able to make up a group consisting of 14 of their own, it would be a lie to say that it's a fair proposal for all classes.

The only ones who can afford to think they wouldn't mind even if the bonus points happened to be on the low side would be Class A, who's currently in 1st place and maintaining the lead.

"I suppose so. It may not be good for us to decide that on our own. However, please don't misunderstand, we're not saying we won't negotiate after 5 minutes have passed. At most, we're only saying that these 5 minutes will offer special treatment".

"Special treatment?".

Matoba's just taking the lead and continuing the conversation. It's precisely because the other classes have yet to form their opinions and make their move that he's able to propose whatever he wants.

Truly what you'd call a preemptive strike.

"We Class A will form a group with the 14 of us and welcome just one person from another class. Leaving aside whether or not this is the optimal strategy, it is true that we're selfishly forcing this on you. As such, the one person we'll be

welcoming, in other words, if it's now that person will receive special treatment from us".

Matoba smoothly conveys the strategy they must have come up with in advance on the bus.

"If you'll join our group, we will ensure there's no risk to that student. Katsuragi-kun will be this group's leader but even if, by any chance, we're last place then Katsuragi-kun will be the only one to bear the responsibility for it. I promise that we won't drag you down through joint responsibility. Ahh, of course, that's only if you won't intentionally lower our scores or deliberately hurt our allies though. If your exam scores are legitimately bad then we'll pardon it all".

So that's the special treatment he referred to.

"Are you serious.....?".

Some students saw some value in that proposal of special treatment. Taking the class into account and forming a group geared towards obtaining the most bonus points in case of victory and assembling group members in order to do so. Such acts are also necessary but the ones who'd think that are the individuals who make up the core of the class.

For your average student, afraid of expulsion, the 'special treatment' proposal that'd allow them to clear this exam with a 100% guarantee of safety isn't such a bad proposal.

Even though Katsuragi ended up as the leader, the one in charge here is the boy named Matoba. Judging from his tone of voice, I could tell he's a relatively capable student.

It probably means that Class A still possesses talented individuals who have not yet revealed themselves.

However, I wonder exactly why Katsuragi did not come forward. Having lost his status within his class, is he being made to bear the responsibility for that?

"Since the 14 of us intend on being first place, there's a good chance that person will also be rewarded with private points. In each class, in regards to this exam, shouldn't there be those without much confidence in themselves?"

Saying that, he looked around at all the students. Now Matoba's words resounded especially in the students who didn't feel like passing up on his offer of special treatment.

"However, if you cannot decide within 5 minutes, we will withdraw our offer of special treatment. If, by any chance, our class receives a penalty, then we won't hesitate to drag you down with us".

"I think this is certainly an interesting proposition but in that case, the benefits of joining your group after 5 minutes would plummet. There isn't a single student who'd want to join when the possibility of being dragged down is high".

There's no need to even say it, Kanzaki added.

"That's right. Nobody's going to join a group knowing they're going to do something like that".

The students who, for a brief moment, considered the special treatment said so in response.

"I don't care how you think of us but we definitely won't break".

Saying that, Matoba dragged his group off and retreated.

It's a way of saying they have no intention of participating in the discussion.

"It's fine if they ignore us. If 5 minutes pass, there'd be no one willing to join that group. Given time, they'll be the ones to return for discussion".

"Suppose so".

Kanzaki and Shibata said so and decided to keep their distance and calm. I

couldn't see any strange movements from Kaneda and the others of Class D.

However, Hirata, who received that offer from Class A, appeared to slightly differ in his train of thought. Approaching me, Keisei and Akito, he called out in a soft voice as though asking for our opinions.

"...what do you guys think?".

"Do you mean about Class A's strategy?".

Keisei took the initiative and asked Hirata.

"Yeah. Surprisingly enough, I don't think their proposal is that bad. The one, absolute condition of this exam is that we, Class C, all overcome it safely. Because we've risen to Class C after all. I don't want to ruin this good mood and I don't wish for the expulsion of a student from the same class. However, the group in last place carries the risk of expulsion. If we have Class A protect the students without confidence in themselves then for one we could rest easy is what I think".

Certainly, if we're going for defense then Class A's proposal has its merits.

"However, it's just whether or not there's any guarantee that Class A will uphold their promise of special treatment to the end. If they happen to be in last place, there's the possibility they'd forcibly go for the joint responsibility. A verbal promise may yet be broken".

Hirata's anxiety over that is understandable.

Essentially speaking, a verbal promise too, can be binding. However, even if we shout that at them they can simply turn it into a pointless argument.

If Class A denies all knowledge of what we're talking about then it'll just muddy the waters and most importantly, their promise to not drag us down is based on the assumption that we won't 'intentionally' sabotage their group.

Even if a student's exam scores happened to be on the low side, it's difficult to

distinguish between an intentional act and a non-intentional one.

Still, in a place like this without any pen or papers, we can't leave it in writing either. Even if we attempt to rely on the teachers, they've already stated that they won't be involved in the partitioning of the groups.

It'd be meaningless to ask them to remember this verbal promise. But still, Matoba's promise of special treatment is something that's reached the ears of all 1st years.

To ignore this and go with the dragging down approach would be a huge disadvantage for them too. In theory, it should be fine to trust them.

".....it might be possible to have them shelter one".

I got in on Keisei and Hirata's conversation.

"That's right. If we make our move then the rest is how Class B and Class D choose to act".

If we accept their special treatment, it could be seen as siding with Class A, after they used a brute force method.

Even though it was only a short time, Hirata seemed to want to persistently think about it until the very last moment. Roughly three minutes have passed since the sudden proposal.

I don't know whether or not they're faithfully counting down each second but Matoba and the others are leisurely standing by.

Perhaps they've assumed someone would raise their hand. Or perhaps they're thinking up a different strategy. We watchfully waited down the remaining two minutes to see whether or not we should wait for Matoba and his group to make their move. That depends on the leaders of classes B and under.

"Kanzaki-shi. I have an idea, may I?".

Class D's Kaneda approached Class B's Kanzaki. Rather than whispering in a

soft voice, it was a bold approach that everyone around could hear. Kaneda beckoned Hirata over too and in response, Hirata went over to him.

"I've determined that this could be considered an opportunity. Thanks to Class A assembling together, even if their class is to win, they'll only be able to gain two classes worth of bonus points. On top of that, considering the conditions they've laid out, we'd be able to position the Class A students however we want. In other words, it means we can form the remaining groups out of all four classes. Can't it be said that the higher our rank, the closer we'll be to Class A and this is the chance to do just that?"

"That's if we can beat the Class A group".

I don't know the exact scores but during Paper Shuffle, Class A destroyed Class B. If this exam is a showdown of academic abilities then we'd be at a disadvantage.

"Sure there are risks. However, this isn't a simple showdown of academic abilities. How about it? I think it's best if we take action to overthrow Class A here. I believe it's not a bad idea".

Kaneda said. To lay siege to Class A through the cooperation of three classes B, C and D is the objective here.

"Well, in order for our three classes to cooperate, we'd have to acknowledge Class A's group of 14 though. But, considering the four classes worth of bonus points we'd get, wouldn't that be nothing much? Furthermore, they're even offering special treatment so everything works out perfectly".

"That's right. I think Kaneda-kun's strategy is sound".

Hirata gave his support. Kanzaki must have been more cautious, since he didn't give an immediate reply. He seems to be thoroughly mulling over the advantages of having four classes.

"But who are we going to place in that group? At the very least, I doubt there are any students in Class B willing to volunteer for a group that's made up chiefly of Class A. That includes me too".

Even if we'll be protected by their special treatment, that person will have to spend a week with that Class A group. One thing's certain and that's that it won't be comfortable.

"I'd like to ask Class B and Class D. Are there any candidates?".

In response to Hirata's words, the students from those two classes look at one another. However, nobody quite raised their hands.

"Then, I'd like to ask everyone from Class C as well. Do you have any candidates?".

This time he asks his own class. However, the reaction was the same as Class B and Class D's. There are probably a few students who're considering the special treatment but being concerned about everyone's gazes as well as the uncomfortableness, no volunteer came forward.

"This is just my onesided guess but you're all thinking that Class A might just keep their promise".

"How can you tell?".

"Because they're Class A, I suppose. Despite having declared they won't drag anyone down, if they still forcibly drag us students from the lower classes into it, then in the future they wouldn't be able to make deals like this anymore. We're still in the 3rd semester of the 1st year, so if they lose trust from us going forward, it would be a huge loss for them, I think".

Hirata's opinion makes sense. If this is the final, decisive fight then Class A won't care. However, there's still more than two years left to go.

If they keep their promises to a certain degree here then they'd be able to use a similar strategy in other exams as well. In time, wouldn't they do something absurd like that, is what Hirata is thinking.

"I don't want to praise the enemy but they are Class A. Their grades are simply better than ours. In other words, I don't think they'd be last place or fall below the borderline by a large margin. That's why I'd like you all to be aware that you are not being assigned to a losing group".

What Hirata is trying to say is something Ike and the others understand well too.

"Fortunately, Class B and Class D don't seem to have any candidates so I'd like to pick someone from Class C to join the Class A group. Even if they win, our class will still receive a reward and we'd be able to avoid an expulsion on the off-chance it should occur. How does that sound?".

He said so and looked at Ike and Yamauchi in particular.

He probably wants to protect the students who feel unsure about their own capability, even if he can only do so for one. Hirata makes one, final push.

"Even if the student receiving special treatment falls below the borderline score, can you promise me that you won't blame them for it?".

Hirata confirms it with Matoba.

"Of course. From the start, we're not expecting anything. If you can uphold the condition we set first then I guarantee it".

"...I suppose I'll go".

The one who whispered that was Ike.

Hearing that, Yamauchi also said the same thing.

"I might also want to go".

On top of that, the Professor also volunteered. A total of three named themselves.

"Then, in the spirit of fairness, let's go with rock-paper-scissors. I'll have the winning one join the group".

Hirata's also guiding them and just like that, the three of them played rock-paper-scissors.

As a result, Yamauchi became the one to join the Class A group.

And just like that, a group with Class A in charge was successfully formed and leaving behind six students from Class A they headed off towards Mashima-sensei.

It was only for a few minutes.

"Now we can form the groups however we like but what to do? We could do it like Class A and form three groups of 14. Just like Class A, we could go with the strategy of not dragging the leftover one down and cooperate with each other. That's also one option. However, as for me, just as I said earlier, I'd like to propose that the four classes join up".

"That's right. Now that we've humored Class A's proposal, we should go with a four class composite".

"No objections, then. What about Class C?".

Kanzaki and Kaneda presented a strategy that would offer the highest bonus points.

"If we're aiming to win then this is necessary. I won't object".

"Hold on, Hirata. Is it really ok to agree just like that? I don't feel like going at it in a group with guys like Ishizaki in it".

Sudou interrupted.

That's not just Sudou's opinion but Keisei, and a lot of other students from

Class C, share that opinion as well. And also, I could hear a few complaints coming from Class B and Class D too. The four class composite offers high bonus points as its advantage but in exchange, it's also easy for problems to arise. If students in a cat-and-dog relationship with one another join hands, it would even have an effect on our scores.

"I get it. I don't think this is something we can decide on right away either. Class A seems to have formed a group of 14 based on some criteria but things probably won't be that easy for us".

Judging from how satisfied all the Class A students seemed to be about it, they're probably going to split up the rewards evenly amongst themselves.

Or perhaps, they've even promised the remaining six greater rewards since they'd be bearing more risk by not joining their group.

This may be a strategy they're able to take precisely because they're in a position of safety know as Class A.

"How about forming a temporary group for now while taking everyone's opinions into account. If we run into problems, we can just disband immediately".

"That's right. I agree with that too. Even if we keep sounding each other out here, we'd only be wasting precious time without coming to a consensus. Class A's already resolved the matter of the groups and have moved onto the next phase".

They've concluded that they wouldn't get anywhere by squabbling with each other. The other students are also leaving it up to their leaders, it seems, since almost no one objected.

"No objections here either".

Kaneda also accepted it without any objections. The group partitioning proceeded without a hitch. However, the students observing this, despite not

voicing their objections, had skeptical looks on their faces.

The one who originally led Class D wasn't Kaneda but rather, Ryuen. And that's something they understand as a matter of fact.

However Ryuen, who they saw as their leader, did not join in on our conversation but instead kept his distance from everyone and doesn't even seem to be paying attention.

The 3rd semester's already begun and it's common knowledge that Ryuen's stepped down. Of course, among the students who don't know the details behind it, there are more than a few who suspect him of faking it.

"I'd like to ask you something. Did Ryuen put you up to it?"

Since even Hirata and Kanzaki hesitated to ask that question, Shibata went straight to the point and did so.

Kaneda took off his glasses and blew away what seemed like accumulated dust on them.

"No, this is my idea. His opinions are irrelevant. Even if, by any chance, we're in cahoots behind the scenes it's still me talking to you right now. Do you have a problem with that?"

Shibata approached and apologized to Kaneda, whose expression had now turned grim.

"I just wanted to confirm that with you. Sorry if I offended you".

"No such thing. More importantly, let's continue our dialogue. If we screw up the group partitioning, it will take up quite a bit of time. We can't afford to spend time on idle talk".

Group partitioning is indeed a difficult matter. And each person in the group, in spite of acting for the common good of the group, will still look out for themselves so they don't end up expelled and they must take action to ensure

their class receives the rewards as well.

It sounds easy but it can be unbelievably difficult. And more than anything, when it comes to forming groups, the real struggle is to not nab the big names but to make sure you don't end up drawing the short straw.

The focus should be on how best to push the students likely to slow you down to another group.

In order to proceed with the group formation, Hirata from Class C, Kanzaki from Class B and Kaneda from Class D each raised their voices as the first of their groups of 15.

They seem like they're putting aside the matter of the minority groups for now. Work began on selecting eleven suitable people from the ranks of the classes.

The few students who immediately volunteered to join the group went over to Hirata. If one of your own is in charge of your group then it means you avoid being dragged down and you'd be familiar with them as well.

Intervention from the other classes can also be minimized that way. As though it's the obvious choice of action, they gathered. Class B also showed a similar trend and they reached their quota faster than expected.

And as for Class D, they had begun slowly forming their group.

I'm probably not the only one keeping an eye on Class D. Leaving aside prominent students like Kanzaki and Shibata, a lot of the other students are also observing them. Because they wanted to know what exactly Ryuen Kakeru is to that class now. Neither Class B nor Class C trusts Class D yet at this stage. It's because the man known as Ryuen had set traps far too many times until now. Understandable.

"What are you going to do, Kiyotaka?"

Keisei and Akito came over to check with me.

"What about the two of you?".

Putting on a contemplative face, I returned the question.

"I'm thinking of sticking with Keisei. Using your head and thinking things over isn't really my forte you see".

".....a group made up chiefly of Class C has its draw. It's just, to be honest, I'm not really down with Hirata's way of doing things".

"And that means?".

Not understanding, Akito asked.

"Rather than prioritizing victory, Hirata is focusing on protecting his comrades. I won't say that's a bad thing but ultimately it means our chances of winning would decrease as a result. As a matter of fact, Ike and Onizuka as well as Sotomura are hoping to join Hirata's group. Whether or not they'll be useful, of course, depends on the contents of the exam. They may yet be able to score better than I can. But, it's far likelier that they won't be given what I think the exam contents will be".

"Well, I suppose that's also true.....".

"Class A isn't a disorderly mob after all. Even if Yamauchi pulls their leg, it's still skeptical whether or not Hirata's group can win. The only thing we can accomplish is to avoid being dragged down. In that case, I'd much rather be a minority in another group. I think we should aim for victory with an elite few".

"If this is a showdown of average points then that'd be a surefire way, huh?".

Out of all the 1st years, there are 80 boys.

20 in each class. If we're to properly divide them up then:

Class A (14 from A, 1 from C) = 15 people

Class B (12 from B, 1 from A, 1 from C, 1 from D) = 15 people

Class C (12 from C, 1 from A, 1 from B, 1 from D) = 15 people

Class D (12 from D, 1 from A, 1 from C, 1 from B) = 15 people

The remaining 20 (3 from Class A, 6 from Class B, 5 from Class C and 6 from Class D).

Those 20 will probably have to split up into and form two groups.

However, just as the majority of the students form teams according to the wishes of their class representatives, there are also students who aren't quite doing that. One of those is unmistakably Class D's Ryuen Kakeru.

As though he had no interest in participating in this exam in the first place, he did not interact with anyone. Rather, he spent that time alone, waiting.

However, it's not like he's a mere loner. Nobody bothered with him but instead of spending that time wallowing in loneliness, he boldly persevered through the isolation.

However, now that not all groups have been decided on, we won't be able to move forward. Inevitably, one of the leftover groups must take Ryuen in.

In a situation where even fellow classmates like Ishizaki won't talk to him, I can think of only one student who can make a move.

"Ryuen-kun. If you don't mind, why don't you join our team?"

The one who called out to him was, of course, my classmate Hirata. Looking at it from Ryuen's perspective, since he's already retired from the whole class conflict, an exam like this one that demands compulsory participation may be nothing more than an annoyance but he probably won't clumsily rebel against it either.

"Hold up, Hirata! This isn't funny, taking Ryuen into our fold!".

All the students who have joined Hirata's group object.

Who'd willingly want to carry around that ultimate bomb? In a strategy that's about climbing up to Class A, Ryuen Kakeru is a most unnecessary person.

In this battle that revolves around the seat of Class A in this school, the students have attained a certain degree of understanding. However, at the same time, their doubts would also be wafting right up.

That is to say, a scenario where they graduate from a class that is 'not Class A'.

Of course, then they wouldn't fall under that dreamlike system which guarantees you any sort of higher education or job. But in that case, just how high an evaluation they'd get, is the point. Those doubts are everlasting for students who have enrolled here. It's like how good news and bad news intermingle all at once. As for the cons, it'd be being labelled as a 'student who couldn't make the cut'.

Whether or not universities and employers would deem them as such and refuse to admit or employ them.

However, on the other hand, there are also opinions that there isn't a shortage of people who have high opinions of the Advanced Nurturing High School's alumni.

The fact that they've had three years worth of valuable experience in a meritocracy and the fact that it's a government-sponsored school should also lead to high evaluations.

In other words, you could say that even if you don't aim for the top and simply graduate that way, you'd still have a lot going for you.

In other words, it doesn't matter if you're from Class D or from Class C and even if you can't climb all the way up to Class A, there's no need to be pessimistic.

As for the 2nd years, Nagumo already reigns over Class A with overwhelming might and support and he's already pulled apart classes B and under.

There's still one year left to go and a chance to turn it all around but it's tough for the lower classes to do so.

And also, the 3rd years are in a similar situation.

It's not as onesided as the 2nd years but the class the older Horikita belongs to has yet to give up their spot at the top even once and is still going strong.

At the very least, it's borderline impossible for the 2nd and 3rd year classes that have fallen down to D to make a comeback.

Ultra C.....unless things are set up such that the points you've gained up until now can all be overturned with the quiz show's final question, it's probably impossible.

Leaving aside the 1st years, who have yet to fully grasp the bigger picture, I can at least rule out any students being fine with expulsion.

I doubt any university or employer will consider a student who lost and got expelled.

The joint responsibility system that stems from the leader is mostly there as a deterrence.

It's a rule established to ensure no one tries to force an expulsion. However, wariness is still crucial.

There's a possibility that there may be a student who wouldn't mind being expelled and on the off-chance that the leader should be expelled, they

probably won't hesitate to drag someone else down with them.

In other words, it's vital that students other than the leader get better scores than said leader, even if it's only by a single point. In order to ensure they aren't liable to be dragged down.

And also, it's important to not incur the resentment of the leader.

"Aren't you a big deal, Hirata? Taking me in and all. But it doesn't look like you'll be coming to a consensus".

That's right. As long as there are people objecting, we won't ever come together as a group.

Sudou and the others will never nod in consent just from Hirata's persuasions alone.

"Hey, Keisei. Isn't being part of the elite few also risky?".

Looking at the remaining people, Akito whispered.

"...more than I expected yes".

That's something Keisei's also caught onto, and he exasperatedly sighs.

The remaining five from Class C would be me, Keisei, Akito, the Professor, Onizuka and Kouenji.

The Professor and Onizuka seem to want to join Hirata's group but that group's simply overloaded and overflowing.

In regards to Kouenji, he always goes at his own pace and he's showing no sign of participating in our discussion.

You could lump these five together but that'd leave two groups of 10 remaining. In other words, the other classes won't be able to do something similar either. Furthermore, since there aren't many students left actively trying

to fill the role of leader, the students freeze up as though time had stopped flowing.

"I don't mind as long as I'm not in a group with Ryuen".

A student from Class B said so and insisted on that.

"I also want to steer clear of Ryuen".

Beside me, Keisei also appears to share the same opinion and everyone seems to want to avoid having to team up with Ryuen.

It's probably because there's no telling what he'll do next. The only ones who could have possibly formed a team with him, Ishizaki and the others, also now seem to be distancing themselves from Ryuen.

The one person who wasn't involved in the rooftop fight and the one person who probably doesn't see Ryuen in a bad light, Shiina Hiyori, also happens to be a girl and so she can't exert much influence here.

"Doesn't seem like we're going to be reaching a consensus easily".

"It's best to put him in Class D's group".

"It would be great if we can do that but right now we're in a difficult situation".

"...they had a falling out, is the rumor I heard. But there isn't enough evidence for us to take that at face value".

It's understandable for Kanzaki, no, almost all of the students here to suspect such.

They probably see it as a situation where Class D is deliberately distancing itself from Ryuen to allow him to pull something off.

"Kanzaki-kun, I think we really should do something if Ryuen-kun's actually

troubled by this".

"Do something, by that do you mean Class B and Class C will lend Ryuen a helping hand, is that it?".

"Yeah".

"Even if Class D's saved by that, it still means two classes could end up as sacrifices. Ultimately, if we weigh the risks on a scale, inviting him in isn't a good idea, right?".

Kanzaki is right. If accepting Ryuen means there'll be some risk to bear, then that's something his class should bear.

There's no need for us to bear that burden. Even if Kaneda and Ishizaki don't want to, it's far more unreasonable to push this onto another class.

If this is a showdown between pairs then Hirata would probably team up with Ryuen without any hesitation.

However, this time around, we're forming groups made up of 10 people or more. One person's goodwill cannot speak for everyone else.

The silence that followed afterwards seemed like it had prolonged the group partitioning. As a result, from the three groups that formed as a result of excluding Ryuen, hair-raising suspicions arose.

3

"I'd like to propose something. Right now the problem is Ryuen and which group we're going to stuff him in and that's what we're all fighting over, right? Then in that case, I don't mind becoming the leader of the group that takes Ryuen in".

The one who said so was Akito, who had been carefully observing the situation from beside me. He continued speaking. However, by requesting that

Ryuuen be accepted when no one else is willing to do so, he raised doubts.

"What are you up to?".

"That's simple, I'd like the reward that comes with getting 1st place in exchange. A lot of it".

It's not like there isn't any opposition towards it but everyone does understand that the act of taking Ryuuen in comes with a high degree of risk.

It's just, I didn't expect Akito to act with the intent of securing the reward. It looked to me as though he had come up with a reason to take Ryuuen in since no other student wanted to do so.

"What are you proposing exactly? You sure you aren't planning on dragging someone else down with you when the time comes for you to take responsibility?".

"Unless you blatantly sabotage us, I won't do such a thing. In the first place, the rules won't let me do that, right?".

The members of the provisional groups fell silent upon hearing Akito's well-reasoned argument. And just like that, though there were various complications, the 1st year boys were able to form six groups.

And with that, my group was also determined.

From Class C there's "Kouenji", "Keisei" and "me". The three of us.

From Class B there's "Sumida", "Moriyama" and "Tokitou". The three of them.

From Class A there's "Yahiko" and "Hashimoto". The two of them.

And then from Class D there's "Ishizaki" and "Albert". The two of them.

10 people in total.

It's clearly unlike the four groups composed mainly of students from one's own class. Still, I suppose that other group Akito's in charge of is the same.

However, there's still a problem with this group I've ended up joining. That is the fact that we still have yet to choose our leader.

I don't think we have any leader type students to actively seek out the title of leader in our group.

Since there isn't anyone here to take the initiative and guide us to a consensus, our group was overcome by an atmosphere of being unable to say anything.

Either way, we first have to report to the school that we've formed our group. We can afford to appoint our leader afterward. As the sixth group, the 10 of us headed over to make our report.

"We managed to avoid Ryuen but it's still doubtful whether or not we'll get a good average score with this group".

Anxious words from Keisei. To be honest, I can't tell how good the students from classes other than C are. Personally speaking, I'd have liked to avoid being in a group with Ishizaki and Albert but it can't be helped now.

Ishizaki blatantly averted his eyes to avoid having to look at me but the others probably won't be able to tell anything from just that.

They'd only get the impression that he thinks nothing of me.

"Kouenji's also going to be a problem".

There's nothing to criticize about his academic and physical abilities as long as he does it seriously but that's only 'if he does it seriously'.

"Even Kouenji won't do something that'd lead to a loss, would he? Because if we drag him down with us, it's over for him after all".

I do feel like he'd noncommittally score above the average though. The only

thing certain about him is that he isn't the type to let us factor him into our calculations.

There's no predicting what'll happen if Kouenji doesn't show signs of being motivated. After giving our report, I realized that the group centered around Class A had stayed behind, despite the fact that they should've already gone outside.

At first, I thought it was so that they could see the formation of the other five groups but apparently that doesn't seem to be the case. Because 2nd year and 3rd year students also appear to be present.

Most importantly, Nagumo Miyabi, the student council president who dominates the 2nd years, is also present.

He confirmed that the 1st years have all finished forming their groups quickly and then he addressed us.

"I thought you'd take a bit more time but this is surprisingly fast".

It appears the 2nd and 3rd years too, have finished forming their small groups.

"I have a proposal to make to you 1st years. Why don't we form the large groups right away?".

"Nagumo-senpai, isn't that supposed to take place tonight?".

"That's because the school didn't think you'd be able to form your small groups right away. Coincidentally, all the school years have just finished forming their small groups. It's best if we get a move on, right?".

Apparently the teachers hadn't expected things to turn out this way either. Sensing that steps are being taken to form the large groups, the teachers started to move in a hurry.

Since the student council president himself made that proposal, there's no way the other students would refuse to do so either.

"Horikita-senpai, you don't mind, do you?"

"Sure. That'd be convenient for us too".

After that brief back-and-forth, discussions were held with Nagumo at their center.

"What to do? Don't you think it'd be interesting to decide things based on something like a draft? Six representatives from amongst the 1st years play rock-paper-scissors and decide the order. Based on that order, they'll pick the 2nd and 3rd year small groups and just like that, the large groups will form. It'd be quick and impartial".

"The 1st years don't know much. Doesn't sound that impartial".

"It's impossible to decide impartially. In the end, there is a difference between the amount of information we each possess".

A brief, yet important back-and-forth between Nagumo and the older Horikita. There's no way any 1st year would interrupt.

"What about you, 1st years? If you have any complaints about this method then please speak up".

Nagumo said so, knowing they can't talk back to him.

"We have no complaints".

Class A's Matoba, representing the 1st years, answered with that.

"I see. Then let's get started right away".

Nagumo gave a smile and joined up with the small group he probably formed himself.

And then, the 2nd years and 3rd years split themselves up into six groups to make it easier to understand. Leaders from each of the five 1st year groups then stepped forward to discuss.

Watching them, Nagumo's expression turned gentle almost as though he were looking at a child.

"Now all that's left is that group over there".

Since our group has yet to choose a leader, no one took the initiative to go and play rock-paper-scissors. I lightly pushed Keisei's back while ensuring I wouldn't be noticed.

For a moment, he made a skeptical face but Keisei resignedly raised his hand. The six representatives of the small groups assembled and forming a circle, they started playing rock-paper-scissors.

As a result, Keisei became fourth in line to select a senior student group. First in line is the Class A group led by Matoba. Second in line is the Class C group led by Hirata. Third in line is the Class D group led by Kaneda.

"You can discuss amongst yourselves which group you want to pick".

The groups to aim for when picking would either be the Nagumo Group that Nagumo, leader of the 2nd years' Class A and student council president, belongs to or the 3rd year group centered around the older Horikita.

However, if you're someone like Hirata, who's acquainted with a lot of people from outside his own school year, you may be able to discern capable groups that you wouldn't be able to otherwise discern at first glance.

Matoba's group, first in line, chose the 3rd year group that Horikita Manabu belongs to without any hesitation.

And with that done, Hirata, second in line, carefully observed the 11

remaining groups one by one. His choice wasn't the other group you'd aim for but rather, a 3rd year group whose members I'm not familiar with.

"Oi, Hirata. Are this really ok? Isn't that student council president's group better?".

It's understandable that Ike would interrupt like that.

"Yeah. I think this is fine. Talented people have their appeal but the problems they bring with them would be proportionately large too. Besides, the seniors from the group I chose aren't half bad either".

He confidently replied with that and nodded. If that's Hirata's decision then Ike too, didn't go any further.

This is probably the level of trust he's accumulated until this point. Then next up is the Class D group.

Kaneda consulted his classmates, or more like, he informed them of which group he's aiming to pick. There didn't seem to be any objections since he immediately picked.

"I'd like Gouda-senpai's group from the 2nd years".

Once again, Nagumo's group wasn't chosen and another group ended up being picked.

"I wonder why they're avoiding Nagumo".

I muttered that simple question and from beside me, Akito answered.

"That's because other than Nagumo-senpai, the other members are of a questionable sort".

"Is that so?".

"Well it's not like they're all questionable but there are a lot of Class Cs and

Class Ds there. The group with a lot of 2nd year Class As is the one Kaneda picked".

In other words, it's not like Kaneda avoided Nagumo for no reason at all. On the contrary, it would mean he chose strong and reliable allies.

But what's curious is why Nagumo didn't form a Class A majority group. Of course, I do know that Nagumo controls the entirety of the 2nd years but still, bringing his class together in one group should be far safer for this exam.

And then Keisei, fourth in line, got his turn.

"Are you okay with me picking?".

Keisei asks the group a simple question.

"I don't really mind. There's no telling either way".

Ishizaki and Class D by extension, seem to be fine with leaving it up to Keisei. Class A too, didn't really have any opinion in particular. Class B, yet to voice their opinion, decided after thinking it over.

"Please choose Nagumo-senpai's group".

Their members seem to be mainly Class Cs and Class Ds but their high evaluation probably comes from the student council president himself being a part of it.

Having received their opinion, Keisei picked the group Nagumo's in charge of.

Afterwards, the discussion continued and the second round of selections ended. Eventually, six large groups were successfully formed.

"Horikita-senpai, we coincidentally happen to be in different large groups. Shall we have a little competition?".

Horikita gave a sharp look at Nagumo, who proposed that. On the other hand, I could hear exasperated sighs coming from the surrounding 3rd years.

Prior to the special exam, Fujimaki of the 3rd years stepped forward as though to complain. I recognized him from the sports festival a while back as a considerably articulate student.

"Nagumo. How many times has it been? Cut it out already".

"What do you mean by how many times, Fujimaki-senpai?".

"You've been challenging Horikita just like this but until now you've never really done anything. But this time around, it's a large scale special exam that involves the 1st years too. We cannot afford to let you act as though this is your personal playground".

"Why is that? There's no such thing as a 1st year or a 3rd year in this school, it's not really strange no matter who challenges who. It's not considered taboo in the special exam's rule book either".

Rather than cower before Fujimaki, who possesses a large physique, Nagumo continued to provoke them.

"We're talking about basic manners here. Even if it's not expressly written, there are things you should and shouldn't do. That much is obvious".

"I don't really think that's the case though. On the contrary, you seniors who seem to only desire infighting within the same school year are the ones hindering the growth of the students enrolled here, isn't that right?".

"You may have become the student council president but that doesn't mean you've gained permission to do anything you want. You should be aware that you're the one abusing his authority".

"If that's what you think then I'll keep that in mind. In that case, why don't you be my opponent as well, Fujimaki-senpai? For the record, you are number two in the 3rd years' Class A".

Blatantly assuming a casual attitude, Nagumo arrogantly put his hands in his pocket. It was a cheap provocation but some 3rd years seem to feel humiliated

by it. A few students tried stepping forward.

However, Horikita kept them in check.

"I've rejected your demands up until now. Do you know why?".

"Let's see. Isn't it because your friends are scared that you might lose to me? But of course, that can't possibly be it. Out of all the people I've seen so far, Horikita-senpai, you're the best. You're not afraid of losing and you never even once thought you'd lose in the first place".

The 2nd years listening to Nagumo's words almost seemed as though they were worshipping him.

Friend, benefactor, it's not limited to just those. He's a rival and a hated enemy yet at the same time, also respected. Anyway, a variety of emotions seem to be directed at Nagumo.

In the 2 years he's been here at this school, this man has accomplished things no ordinary person would have been capable of accomplishing and that's probably why.

To what extent those are, not even the 3rd years know. The 1st years have even less insight into that.

"I'm just like you, Fujimaki-senpai. I don't desire meaningless conflict either".

"The conflict you desire drags others into it way too much".

"That's this school's modus operandi and I think that's the real thrill of it.....well, that's just the difference between our opinions though. I mean, I thought I could have had surefire competition with you, senpai, during the sports festival's relay but regrettably I wasn't able to realize that. I'm still frustrated about that, you know?".

"I don't think this is an exam where a competition between a 2nd year and a

3rd year will bear any fruit".

"That's probably right. Senpai's just that kind of person. But as for me, I just want a personal battle between the former student council president and the current student council president. You're about to graduate and leave soon. Before that, I want to see whether or not I've surpassed you".

Nagumo's demand is unstoppable, his craving unsatiable.

"What are you intending to compete with?".

For a moment, the 3rd years seem surprised. It's because the older Horikita seemed as though he'd accept Nagumo's challenge.

"Which one of us can expel the most students. How does that sound?".

Both the 1st years and the 3rd years stirred in response to that one word from Nagumo.

"Stop joking".

"I really think it'll be interesting but I'll refrain this time. If you want me to make a serious proposal then it'd be which group gets the higher average score. Simple and easy to understand".

"I see. If that's the case then I don't mind accepting".

"Thank you. I knew you'd accept, senpai".

"However, this is a personal fight between you and me. Don't involve others".

"Don't involve others, huh? But judging from the manner of the special exam, I'd say inciting someone to sabotage your enemy's group is one strategy".

"That's far from the essence of this exam. At most you should only question your own group's unity. You shouldn't take advantage of your enemy group's

opening to stir them up, even by mistake".

".....that is to say?".

Ishizaki ended up asking Keisei that.

"It means nothing other than a fair-and-square meritocratic competition will be acknowledged. If I have to put it simply, it probably means you can't use dirty strategies like Ryuen does".

"...I see".

Leaving aside the conversation between those two, the older Horikita and Nagumo continued their conversation.

"If you won't humor the conditions I've set, then I have no intention of accepting".

What the older Horikita rejected are actions taken to ensnare one's enemy.

In all likelihood, his goal here is to block Nagumo off from his forte.

"So what this means is that in order to win, I can't attack Horikita-senpai's pawns. I'm fine with that".

I had expected him to be troubled by it but Nagumo surprisingly complied. However, the older Horikita continued.

"That's not limited to this group only. I won't acknowledge any method that causes harm to the other students too. The moment I confirm you've meddled somehow I will call off our competition".

"As expected of you, senpai. You don't miss anything. I did consider requesting cooperation from groups other than Horikita-senpai's and having them attack yours.....".

He said so while boldly laughing.

"I understand. I seem to be the only one craving for this competition so I'm willing to humor a certain amount of conditions. Fair-and-square, let's see which one of us can score higher through group unity. Let's have that be our competition. I'll say this in advance but there's no need to set any penalties in case of victory or defeat, right? At most, let this be a fight with just our prides on the line".

Regarding that, the older Horikita gave neither affirmation or refutation. In all likelihood, it probably means he's not even intending to bet his pride on this.

4

That long opening performance ended and our small group was called to a halt by Nagumo.

"Our seniors are gone but do you mind sparing some time? Because you guys don't seem like you've actually chosen your leader after all".

As Nagumo pointed that out, Keisei fell into a slight panic.

"Ehh, how could you tell?".

"When I told you all to play rock-paper-scissors, it was painfully clear how awkward his actions were. If a leader had been chosen upon group formation then he should have stepped up right away. By the way, back then one other group also had a delayed reaction. If I have to add to that, I'd say the groups who didn't elect their leaders are the 3-4 class composite balanced groups".

Nagumo probably doesn't know each and every one of the 1st years, yet he still deduced how our groups were partitioned.

It's not really that hard of a deduction to make but still, it's not something just about anyone could tell.

The delay was only a slight one. As a matter of fact, I immediately pushed

Keisei on the back and had him play rock-paper-scissors. If we held discussions there then our lack of a leader would have been revealed.

I did so because I felt it needless to reveal such a weakness ourselves. That attempt of mine seems to have been in vain though.

"I believe it's fine to elect a leader afterwards though".

"That's right. But we'd like to have a good grasp on who the 1st year leaders are. Besides, I wanted to teach you that a leader is a role that should be assumed as quickly as possible. The later that role is assumed, the longer it'll take for the leader to be aware of his position and the anxiety of it will weigh all the more on him".

It's questionable how much of that is pertinent but there's no mistaking the fact that Nagumo wanted us to choose our leaders right here.

"...so what do we do?".

Keisei asks that of our group, which excluding me, he isn't all too familiar with. Keisei himself probably doesn't want to play this role either.

"It doesn't matter how you choose. Please just choose a leader right now".

Since it's the student council president himself giving us instructions, even the delinquent-like Ishizaki and Albert were unable to object.

"No one's going to volunteer for this. Shouldn't we go with rock-paper-scissors for this as well?".

Ishizaki says so to get it over with and extends a balled fist. I played along and did the same.

Nine people and nine fists formed a circle.

One person's missing. There's a student who didn't extend his hand for rock-paper-scissors.

"Oi, Kouenji".

Keisei calls out to Kouenji, who's looking out the window a slight distance away. However, Kouenji did not even look at us.

"Hey you, blondie. Get a move on".

An angry voice came from amongst the 2nd years. Kouenji then finally realized he's being called and turned around.

"Fufufu. You're referring to the striking beauty of my hair, are you not?".

"What?".

He didn't say anything regarding rock-paper-scissors but rather, only gave a response about his hair.

"Get serious, Kouenji".

"What do you mean by serious? Is playing rock-paper-scissors your definition of serious?".

"Hey, 1st year.....Kouenji, right? Are you mocking us senior students?".

Of course he'd end up drawing attention. That's something I had expected from the get-go.

"Mocking you? No, I am not mocking anything. From the very beginning, I had no interest in you lot. You may relax".

He probably intended to say he isn't mocking anyone but it ended up completely backfiring.

"I will not play rock-paper-scissors. Because I have no interest in being the leader".

"I have no interest in it either and neither does anyone else. But there's no other way, right?".

Keisei exasperatedly tries to persuade him but Kouenji showed no sign of caving.

"You say some strange things, Boy. If there is no interest, then there's no reason to participate, is that not correct?"

"No. That's how the rule works".

"The rule is that someone from within the group must become the leader. In that case, someone else just needs to be the leader".

"Stop screwing around. You can't act selfishly like that here".

Ishizaki, who once had a quarrel with Kouenji along with Ryuen, flared up at him.

"Fufufu. Then why don't you go ahead and make me the leader of your group?"

Kouenji said so and swiped his bangs. At that unexpected proposal, Ishizaki froze up.

"Then I'll have you be the leader. You don't mind, right?"

"You're free to push that role onto me. I have no intention of objecting to that each and every time. If we lack one the group will be punished right? If you're so afraid of that then you're welcome to do that".

But Kouenji's subsequent words shocked everyone present.

"I'll do whatever I've decided to do. However, if I have decided not to do something then there's no way I'll do it. In other words, it means no matter who comes talking to me, my resolve will not waver. Of course, I won't be carrying out the duties of a leader either. I may even boycott this exam. Even if that results in our average score falling below the borderline, even if it means dragging someone down. Okay?"

".....that's.....if you do something like that, you're getting expelled!".

"Fu. Fu. Fu. Yes that would be the case".

He seemed almost as though he had no fear of expulsion.

"However, this sort of topic would normally be considered a foolish question though. Even if I score zero throughout the entirety of the exam, as long as you lot struggle hard then there's no risk of falling below the borderline. Just go ahead and do it without holding back".

Kouenji said so as he swiped his hair back.

But there's no guarantee that we wouldn't fall below the borderline and his words have no leg to stand on. It's just Kouenji's own prediction that this isn't going to be such a difficult exam.

Or perhaps he's just randomly spouting nonsense because he doesn't want to participate. However, Kouenji's alienness has most likely been sufficiently conveyed.

"What a guy. Must have a screw loose up there".

Ishizaki muttered as he took a step back and nodded.

However, I discovered a contradiction in Kouenji's words. But of course, Ishizaki and the others here definitely wouldn't be able to spot that contradiction though.

Why? Because there is no falsehood in his behavior itself. If Kouenji intentionally created that contradiction then.....

To confirm that would require taking the huge risk of waiting for exam day to come though.

"Let's just calm down, he probably doesn't have the balls to score zero either way".

If possible, they probably wanted to forcibly push the troublesome and risky

role of leader onto Kouenji.

Of course, looking at it from another class's perspective, it would mean losing the chance to earn double the points as well as facing the possibility of being dragged down and so they probably have mixed feelings on the matter.....

But if Kouenji really does score zero then only a disastrous outcome awaits.

"Stop it, Ishizaki. You keep that up and you'll be the one dragged down".

Hashimoto, in an act of saving an enemy, restrained Ishizaki.

"But.....shit, if getting your way by taking a hard line's allowed then I'm definitely not doing it either".

"Well, I suppose so".

Despite his exasperation, Hashimoto nodded as though in acceptance.

Nobody actually thinks this group will place first. That's basically why there isn't a single student willing to assume the role of leader.

It might be that our group's in a far more difficult situation than I had expected. If Kouenji acts Kouenji-like to the very end then we'll lose a considerable amount of points.

The scenario in which we fail to obtain even the 'lowest score' is probably one the 2nd years and 3rd years have not factored into their calculations.

But then someone came forth in response to Kouenji's bizarre behavior.

"I've heard rumors about you, Kouenji".

A surprisingly unexpected person.....Nagumo, who doesn't seem like the type to have had much contact with Kouenji, approached him as though he had found something of great interest to him.

The two who'd never meet under normal circumstances.

"I know you too. You're the person who assumed the role of the new student council president, aren't you?".

Showing no fear even towards the student council president, Kouenji responds in his usual manner.

"You're free to play the fool all you want but do you really not mind being expelled?".

Towards Kouenji, who did not show any weakness, Nagumo asked that question. And he continued.

"This school system's a troublesome one. Regardless of that fact, you've made it this far with that noncommittal attitude of yours. That is in order to graduate from this school. But you'll casually accept the risk that comes with having the leader role pushed onto you here, and on top of that you'll even boycott the exam? Liar. You just don't want to put in the effort to reach Class A and you really don't have any intention of actually leaving this school".

"Fufufu. You're saying some amusing things. How can you tell that I'm lying?".

It's probably true. Not too long after enrolling, the class once asked Kouenji whether or not he had any desire to aim for Class A and he's given us his answer before.

That he has no interest in doing so.

That he only wants to graduate from this school. He doesn't want to be expelled but there's no need for him to aim for the top either.

It's very similar to what I'm hoping to get out of this school. In other words, he's taking a stance where it's no problem for him even if he holds back a fair bit in exams.

That explains his cocksureness.

"That's what's written all over your face".

As Nagumo said that teasingly, Kouenji laughed pleasantly.

"Bravo. Bravo".

Clap. Clap. He gave his applause. And he then gave an honest answer to Nagumo's fair reasoning.

"I lied because I didn't want to be the leader. Allow me to correct myself. I have no intention of aiming for Class A, but neither do I intend on getting expelled. Simply put, I think a noncommittal approach like this is best".

Kouenji answered with that almost as though making a confession. Besides, everyone seems to have accepted that but Nagumo did not.

"You have no interest in Class A, huh? That's also a lie, right?".

"Oh my, oh my. Am I already being branded as a liar?".

"If that isn't a lie then that'd give rise to a slight uncertainty, Kouenji. Don't you already have a surefire way to graduate from Class A in hand?".

Nagumo suddenly said something unbelievable. The 1st years like me and Ishizaki aren't the only ones surprised but the 2nd and 3rd years too, were shocked.

"Hmm? You sure do say the most interesting things. If you don't mind, do tell me the logic behind that".

"You sure? If I explain the logic behind that here, that 'surefire way' of yours will become unusable. No, I'll make it unusable, you know?".

"Fufufu. I don't mind. I just want to know whether or not you can really read me".

Rather than be frightened by Nagumo's questioning, Kouenji happily laughed.

"To promote yourself to Class A through the use of 20 million points. It's a strategy everyone's thought of and tried carrying out at least once. In practice though, it's not that easy to save up that many points. Yet it's still not entirely impossible. Right after you enrolled, the first thing you did was to figure out how the points that graduating 3rd years leave behind are treated".

"Keep going".

"After graduation, your private points are encashed so that you'll be able to use them outside of the school as well. Their value would decrease, of course, compared to when they were still points but that still doesn't change the fact that this is an unprecedented system. You were intending on buying those private points from them at a price higher than the one they'd get from encashment, right?".

Hearing Nagumo's explanation, the rest of them were understandably shocked and couldn't hide their surprise.

And Kouenji, who had that pointed out for him, nodded in satisfaction and then opened his mouth.

Kouenji too, replied accurately.

"That's exactly right. Not too long after I enrolled, I concluded as such and arrived at the truth. That no matter how low I fall during my time enrolled here, as long as I legally acquire those private points at the very end, I will still be able to graduate from Class A in no time. And since I came up with this exploit all too easily, school suddenly became a bore to me".

A miraculous strategy he's capable of pulling off precisely because he's rich, is what it is.

Buy private points at a high price from students who have already given up on aiming for Class A, or from students whose success is already guaranteed or from students whose graduation is fast approaching.

If there's a guarantee that their points will be purchased after graduation, it wouldn't be strange even if a great many students are willing to make the transfer.

However, this is extremely difficult under normal circumstances. If you purchase them at the same value it'd be after being encashed, that would be 20 million yen.

Unless it's within a high school student's means to prepare such a sum, it probably wouldn't be a trustworthy matter even if they say they'll pay for it.

"Fortunately for me, before I enrolled here at this school, I set up a profile on my company's homepage with my picture on it as next in line to be CEO. It means I possess the power to easily move tens of millions. It was extremely easy to get them to trust me".

"Yeah. As a matter of fact, there are many 2nd year students who plan on selling their points to you. There are probably more than a few of those among the 3rd years too. You seem to have sealed their lips but there are quite a lot of 2nd year students who have placed their absolute trust in me. There were also students who consulted me on whether or not they should fall for your cajolery. Of course, I approved of it as a plan. It's not like it doesn't have its risks but you seem to be a fairly rich guy. But that ends today".

Nagumo said so and looked towards the 2nd and 3rd years.

"Even if he is actually that rich, Kouenji isn't a trustworthy man, as you can see. If necessary, he's more than willing to lie. It's best to not make any transactions with him regarding points, even by mistake".

He said that and added one more thing.

"Just in case, I'll report this to the school. Because purchasing private points prior to graduation isn't really something that ought to be permitted after all".

"I don't mind. I had only been making preparations to ascend to Class A after all. I haven't yet decided whether or not to actually carry it out".

At best, Kouenji had only been considering it as one out of many strategies. Still, what an absurd story.

Well, in reality, unless you can prepare a great sum of 20 million then this is a strategy that's exclusive to Kouenji.

"...I always thought you were a strange one but your strategy hinges on the outside, huh? Bravo".

Hashimoto muttered that as though in both admiration and exasperation.

"By tossing that strategy out the window himself, what's Kouenji planning on doing?".

A lot of eyes fell on Kouenji's classmates, Keisei and myself but there's no way we'd know that. No, to be more precise, there's only one thing that comes to mind.

That is that there's no reason why Kouenji needs to graduate from Class A.

Looking at it from Kouenji's perspective, since he only wants to 'graduate from this school', cooperating with his allies must have felt like a pointless endeavour to him.

Even if he's found an exploit, there's no real need to force himself to use it.

That's why he didn't really mind it being revealed. Or perhaps he's found enjoyment in finding another exploit.

Nagumo's insight into and information regarding Kouenji is considerable.

"This is the first time I've seen Kouenji having to explain something away".

I also agreed with those mutters that came from Keisei. However.....

"But student council president, now there's no more reason for me to play rock-paper-scissors. On top of having confessed to everything, allow me to say that I have no intention of accepting the role of leader".

"...I see".

Certainly, Kouenji may have had a way of raising money. But there's no change to his stance. On the contrary, he revealed his one advantage and threw it away himself.

You could say that now there's no way of forcing Kouenji to assume the role of leader. Kouenji is extremely wealthy and even if he's expelled, it's not like his future prospects have gone dark.

I can hardly imagine a person like that being afraid of expulsion. Of course, we could take drastic measures and force Kouenji into the leader role but I doubt there are any students in our group brave enough to do so.

Because they'll be damned if they get dragged down by Kouenji.

"You know, it might be for the best if I just take that role.....".

Resignedly, Keisei raised his hand.

Starting with that, students from the other classes reacted but there are students in our group that will be hard to deal with such as Kouenji, Ishizaki and Albert.

And also, the prospects of us winning against the other groups are low. As such, there aren't any other students who volunteered as though this were an auction.

"Then it's decided".

Nagumo oversaw the election of our leader and then dismissed the group.

After that, in accordance with the instructions we received from the school, we left the gymnasium.

5

"This...feels a lot older than I thought it'd be".

The small groups were each brought to their rooms. Inside each room, there are wooden bunk beds that would either increase or decrease in number depending on how many people we have.

Ishizaki immediately walked over to the bunk bed at the very end of the room and used the ladder to climb up to the top bunk.

"This is mine".

"What are you talking about? You're hogging it all to yourself, that's unfair".

Yahiko angrily said so in response to Ishizaki calling dibs on it.

"Early bird gets the worm".

Ishizaki laid down on it while laughing and looking down at Yahiko.

"We should decide who gets what after discussing it first".

The leader, Keisei, also gives a warning that selfish actions won't be tolerated.

And just like he did with Yahiko, Ishizaki probably intended to ignore him, but since I was standing beside Keisei, our eyes met for a brief moment.

He had been doing his best to avoid making eye contact with me but since we're in the same group, there's no avoiding it forever.

".....".

For a moment there, Ishizaki looked like he was terrified and panicking. He panicked and jumped off the bed.

"By discussing it.....how exactly do we decide then?".

Keisei tilted his head in confusion at Ishizaki's sudden change of heart. He may have interpreted the warning from Keisei as being a warning from me.

If so, that's an insane amount of paranoia.

Because I don't really think it's that strange for us to decide our beds on a first come first served basis.

Of course, it would be best if we can decide it smoothly after holding a discussion though.

"Fufufu. If you have no need of it then shall I relieve you of it?".

Kouenji said so and then leaped onto the bed that Ishizaki had been occupying.

"Hey, what the hell are you doing?".

Ishizaki came to his senses and he barked that out at Kouenji, who's now relaxing on the top bunk.

But the guy he's talking to is Kouenji and common sense doesn't work on him. He didn't even listen and in a few seconds, he's already making himself comfortable as though it were his own room.

"Fuck, screw the discussion".

Starting with Kouenji, a few of the students called dibs on their beds. Ishizaki too, stopped quarrelling with Kouenji and instead called dibs on the top bunk of a different bed.

The one thing all students had in common is that they all preferred the top bunk of the bed. Only Albert, whose large physique makes it hard for him to climb to the top bunk, settled on the bottom bunk beneath Ishizaki without any complaints and sat down there.

The atmosphere's already changed to one where there's no need to decide via discussion.

"I have no choice but to go there then".

Keisei said so as he called dibs on the bed beneath Kouenji which no one else wants to take.

The others took their time realizing it but it's really great to have a comrade willing to do things no one else wants to do.

By the way, I too settled on the bottom bunk. Above me is Class A's Hashimoto.

"It's a pleasure, umm.....".

He reached out from the top bunk to greet me but he doesn't seem to know my name.

"I'm Ayanokouji. Pleasure".

"I'm Hashimoto".

We gently shook hands as though promising to be great friends with one another.

As for today, we're free from now on. As such, we didn't act collectively as a group but rather we chose to do our own thing.

If we had a leader like Hirata with us we may have been making an effort to know each other better now but.....as for me, I have mixed feelings on the matter. It's regrettable that I won't have a chance to get to know students from other classes better yet at the same time, I'm relieved that there won't be any troublesome back-and-forths.

"Hey, this may be a straightforward question but do you think Albert can speak Japanese? He does understand Japanese, right?"

Hashimoto, from the top bunk, asked me that question regarding Ishizaki and Albert himself.

"Obviously. Right, Albert?"

Ishizaki leaned out of the top bunk and looked down at Albert in reply to Hashimoto. However, Albert did not answer and only continued to stare straight ahead.

"...could it be that he doesn't understand you?"

"Aren't you guys classmates?"

Hashimoto said so while laughing and Ishizaki added this in frustration.

"It can't be helped, right? Ryuen-san's the one normally giving him orders after all".

"Ryuen-san, eh?"

Ishizaki casually ended the '-san' suffix to his name. However, as of right now, that would lead to a strange contradiction.

"The rumor about you having a fight with him and overthrowing him from his position of leader, is that true?"

"Shut it. Of course it's true. Right now.....was just old habit".

Far from working on the group's unity, it appears we've already begun sounding each other out. The rumor about Ryuen having stepped down is one whose authenticity everyone doubts.

Giving a side glance to that quickly brewing conflict, I decided to take a walk into the building's interior.

The first day's mealtime, in other words, the first opportunity to make contact with the girls since getting off that bus in the morning has come.

The spacious cafeteria looks like it can fit quite a lot of people in it and if you go up the stairs, you get a nice view of the first floor.

From a cursory inspection, it looks like it'd fit about 500 people and there's also a considerable number of students occupying it.

"It's not easy to meet up with someone now that we don't have our phones".

Horikita and Kei are probably looking for me but I didn't make a move.

In this case, even if those two happened to find me, their reactions would be polar opposites.

Horikita would unreservedly call out to me but Kei would wait and see. Because she'd understand that I'm not looking for her, in other words, that there's no need to make contact with each other right now.

On the very first day, making contact with various students is something to be expected. I don't think I'm being marked in particular but there's a good chance that I'll attract attention from Sakayanagi and the student named Nagumo.

Hirata and Satou had been accompanying us at the time, but Nagumo still saw Kei and I together.

As such, I'd like to avoid clumsily making contact. I'll go solo and observe, to a certain extent, who's making contact with who.

However, the meal comes first. The mere one hour we had been allocated is precious time after all. Holding a tray in my hands, I sat alone.

If this had been a normal school day then the different school years would have been separated into different areas to a certain extent but this time around, since we're being divided up into groups instead, students from across

all school years intermingle and eat their meals together.

They mostly gather in groups but there are also quite a few students moving around for the sake of gathering information.

There are also a lot of those who are doing so because this is the only place you can make contact with the girls too.

There are also couples who are spending time together because said time together happens to be limited to this period as well.

"Haaaafuuuuuuuu".

I heard a cute voice close by that sounded exhausted.

It's the leader of the 1st years' Class B, Ichinose Honami. There were many boys and girls crowded around her.

I took a seat on a vacant chair nearby and decided to eavesdrop. Right now, I'm confident that my surroundings won't notice me, more or less.

"...it's pathetic that I'm proud of not having much of a presence though".

Anyway, Ichinose and the others didn't react at all even though I'm sitting not too far away. Well, there are about 500 students in the cafeteria so they're probably not going out of their way to identify each and every student near them.

"Good work out there, Honami-chan. Was it difficult?".

"Nyahaha. If you ask me whether or not it was difficult then I'd say it was difficult. I thought we'd be able to decide on our groups more smoothly---. But when you've got to quarrel, you've just got to quarrel I guess".

"It can't be helped. The other classes are enemies after all".

"But according to what Kanzaki-kun said earlier, it went pretty well on the boys' side though".

"Ehh~? Really~? It took us past noon though".

It's not like it went smoothly for the boys either but it appears the girls had quarrelled even further. Perhaps the teachers didn't schedule any lessons today for that very reason?

"Hey, do you think somebody will get expelled in this exam.....?".

"It'll definitely be fine, is what I'd like to say but so far there hasn't been a single expellee from amongst the 1st years. Still, I don't think we should let our guard down".

She seems like she's able to take on this special exam with an appropriate awareness of danger.

"What should we do if we get dragged down.....?".

"It'll be fine, Asako-chan. As long as you put in serious effort, it won't come to that".

"You think so.....?".

"Besides, if it ever does come to that, we can just save you after all".

Ichinose said that to console the despondent Asako. Out of all those members, Ichinose seemed to be the most exhausted one but she was the most stouthearted one there.

"I'm exhausted".

Ichinose leans her upper body on the table. Catastrophically enough, that ended with her noticing me sitting not too far away from her.

"Ayanokouji-kuuuun yaho~".

Ichinose? I didn't notice you there. Answering with that would make it feel unnatural on the contrary.

Considering that despite the distance, I could hear her voice well enough, it would be best if I gave an honest answer.

"You were having a good time".

"Girls' chats may or may not be their source of power".

Saying something I don't really get, Ichinose once again leaned on the table. Since she usually doesn't show this defenseless side of hers, it was quite the unexpected sight.

"Ahh, can't I do this?".

She said that as she tried straightening herself up and so I stopped her.

"It's normal to do something like that when you're tired".

"Sorry---. For making it slightly uncomfortable".

It's not uncomfortable at all. I said so internally since I couldn't put it into words.

"It's become quite the difficult group, hasn't it?".

"It was difficult until we formed this current group, is perhaps how I should put it. Girls know very well what they like and dislike, or more like, there are more than a few girls who are willing to say they don't like another girl straight to their face. In that regard, when it comes to personal feelings, aren't they a lot of boys who like to muddy the waters?".

"Ryuuen's openly disliked though".

"It's bad to laugh at that but that really couldn't be helped, could it? But isn't Ryuuen-kun tired too? To be disliked by everyone must be tiring".

That way of looking at it isn't wrong but that probably doesn't apply to Ryuuen. Because it looked to me that he's able to relax now that he no longer has anything to shoulder.

"Don't get too fired up".

I concluded that it's pointless to overstay my welcome here and so I stood up from my seat.

"It's fine, it's fine. Being energetic is about the only thing I have going for me. See you later, Ayanokouji-kun".

Ichinose waved at me and saw me off. One hour per day. That's the rule this time around concerning opportunities to make contact with the girls.

Boys and girls can't meddle with each other directly but I imagine this hour's clearly meant to let us share information with one another.

In all likelihood, we're meant to gather information here, give out instructions and fight our fight.

This is probably where students who are trusted and who possess high communication abilities shine.

"I'm not suited for this at all".

Just like that time on the uninhabited island, there's basically nothing I can do here.

Chapter 2: Human Nature Put to the Test

It's past six in the morning. A light BGM echoed through the room. It's coming from the speakers installed in the room so one doesn't even have to think about it to know that it's the signal for us to get out of bed.

The room is still dark and I couldn't see sunlight pouring in from beyond the thin curtain.

"What the hell.....keep it down".

It was Ishizaki's first absentminded words of the morning.

There are students who didn't wake even after hearing that tone but here and there, they start putting on their glasses, sitting upright and slowly waking up.

"We're probably going to start with whatever's scheduled for this period today, aren't we?".

I heard Hashimoto whisper that from above my bed while sighing.

"For now, we should all get up. If even one of us is late, we might all get a demerit".

Keisei said so while putting on his jersey.

As long as we're living in the same room, joint responsibility is something we cannot avoid.

"Oi, Kouenji's not here".

"Good morning, gentlemen. Were you about to head out in search of me?".

Having worked up a bit of sweat on his forehead, Kouenji appeared with a pleasant smile on his face. Looks like he woke up before we did.

"Toilet? Doesn't look that way".

"Fufu. It was a good morning and so I had been carrying out my morning training, you see".

"What training? There's no telling what's waiting for us today. I can't approve of you pointlessly tiring yourself out".

Even if Keisei gives him a warning like that, he's not the kind of man who'd listen. On the contrary, he gave his rebuttal with a smile.

"This is nothing. Even after a training session, I possess incomparable stamina. Besides, if you cannot approve of this consumption of stamina then don't you think you should have warned the group of that yesterday?"

"That's.....because I didn't expect any training to be going on".

"No, no. When it comes to you, that won't fly. I remember sharing a room with you back on the cruise. You should have at least a slight recollection of the fact that I'm the kind of man who never skips out on training, isn't that right?"

Surely it's out of the question for you to not remember something like that. As though saying that, Kouenji spat those words out.

"Stop acting so high and mighty all the time, Kouenji".

It's not like he was trying to protect Keisei or anything but Ishizaki stood in front of Kouenji. From the election of our group's leader until now, Kouenji's been acting selfishly. It's understandable that the group would object strongly to that. He's probably already being treated as a disruptive element. There's no time.

The one thing I'd like to avoid is being late on the very first day. Nominally it would be someone like Hirata who'd make that call and guide the group.

However, seeing as how our group is clearly lacking a leader, that did not come to pass.

"Promise us, right here, that you'll be cooperative".

"What do you mean by promise to be cooperative? Does that mean you yourself feel loyalty towards this improvised group? I hardly see it that way".

"I don't want to cooperate either".

Ishizaki looks around. The prime reason for that being me and nothing else. He unintentionally ended up landing his gaze on me.

"Because of Class A. Does that reason not satisfy you?".

Hashimoto, who came down beside me, ended up receiving that gaze.

"Tch. It's not just A, it's all of them".

Lumping us all together like that, Ishizaki once again turned back to face Kouenji.

"Just like Red Hair-kun, you seem to be headed down a bad path. It's a pleasant feeling just watching you but it's getting old now that I have to interact with you directly. Rather than minding me, shouldn't you be on your way to the assembly point? Before your incompetence gets revealed".

Kouenji may be the only one who has grasped the situation but considering the situation, it's like pouring fuel on a fire.

By using provocative words like that, it's clear that he's stoked Ishizaki's anger.

"Fine by me, you bastard!".

Ishizaki yelled. And then Keisei, who was made aware of it by Kouenji's remarks, checked the clock and panicked.

"There's not even five minutes left until assembly. Please leave the quarrelling for later".

"Not my problem. If we're late then it's his fault!".

Looks like a little bit of water won't be enough to extinguish the flames of

Ishizaki's anger anymore now.

On the contrary, it seems to be gaining momentum. Keisei's keeping an eye on the situation to a certain extent and he can also make declarations on it.

However, he's not taking any action that'd take their feelings into account.

"You're a simple-minded person. That's why you've fallen to Class D".

Remarks that are just adding fuel to the fire are dropped this time by Yahiko. As for the rest, the Class B students are keeping a low profile and waiting for this whole situation to blow over.

"How unfortunate. I don't know whether we can make it with this group or not".

Beside me, Hashimoto sighed and lamented the situation.

"Well, can't be helped I guess".

Hashimoto said so. I thought he'd continue playing the role of the observer but he punched the wooden bed with his balled fist. All the other students, save for Kouenji, reacted to that sound.

"Let's calm down. I won't say it's a bad thing to quarrel and slug it out but this is hardly the place nor the time for it, right? Of course, if the furniture we're using gets damaged, it'll also become a matter of taking responsibility. If our faces start swelling, we may be questioned on what happened too. Right?".

Creating a silence through making a sound without using his voice, Hashimoto said what needed to be said. Ishizaki, who had been yelling about how it's not his problem, now probably understands that this isn't the place for that.

"Glasses-kun over there, what's your name again?".

"Yukimura".

"That's right, it's exactly as Yukimura-kun said. There's no time. For now, tuck away your anger and let's head for the assembly, shall we? Then, we'll eat our breakfast and if your anger still hasn't abated by then, you're free to decide whether or not to slug it out again. That's what being in a group means, right?".

"...aren't you glad, Kouenji? You get to live for a while longer".

"Yeah, I'm really glad. Because I happen to be a pacifist after all".

Despite everything, this is to be expected of Class A I guess. I don't know where Hashimoto stands in the class's hierarchy but he brilliantly tided over the situation.

The match has been struck but at least somehow it didn't get as far as an explosion. While carrying a bomb with the fuse lit, we left the room.

And so students from across school years, having been separated into groups, gathered in one, single classroom.

Approximately 40 people. You could say it's almost like we make up a class. The 1st years all casually extend the morning's greetings to the 2nd and 3rd years.

Not too long afterwards, a teacher came into the classroom.

"I'm in charge of Class B from the 3rd year. The name's Onodera. I'll be performing a rollcall now and then you'll be heading outside and cleaning your designated areas. After that, you'll be cleaning the school building. This will be routine every morning. If it rains, you will be exempt from outside cleaning but since that means you'll be spending more time cleaning the school building, it's not like the time for this will decrease. And also, regarding lessons from today onwards, it won't be the school's teachers doing the teaching but rather individuals who teach various topics. Don't forget to welcome them properly and act politely".

After that short explanation, our group headed off to do some cleaning.

1

The smell of grass coming from the tatami spread out before us tickled our noses.

A room that, for some reason, felt nostalgic to me was spread out before my eyes. The place the teacher escorted us to was a spacious area that looked like a dojo.

It looks like we'll be completing this task alongside some students from the other groups.

"Starting from today, this will be where you practice Zazen in the morning and in the evening".

"This shall be the first time I've done Zazen in my life".

The Professor said so casually from the other side but upon hearing those words, the man in charge of this task approached him.

"I-Is something the matter?".

The Professor, surprised by the overbearing pressure of the silence, asked that while looking up.

"Is that dialect something you're born with? Or perhaps it's related to your hometown?".

"That is not the case.....".

"Then you're not from the Muromachi period or the Edo period either right?".

"Huh? Of course that is not the case either.....".

"I see. Then I don't know why you're speaking like that but here that's a

demerit for you. Take this chance to fix that ridiculous dialect of yours and grow up".

"W-What?".

"What will someone think if you speak that way to them on your first meeting. Or perhaps you'd like to me to explain it from that angle as well?".

I don't know why the Professor chooses to speak that way but even I could tell that it's intentional on his part.

In society.....or at least in a strict environment, he surely won't be permitted to speak that way.

It has nothing to do with rules or obligations but rather, it falls within the territory of 'morals' and 'manners'. Of course, it's possible for you to refuse to do so by claiming this is an idiosyncrasy of yours but only a minority of people could get away with that.

"Alright, listen up here. To be acknowledged, to be known, to prove that you're special and to act uncaringly of others. There are plenty of people like that. Not just youngsters but the elderly as well, now and then you get people like that".

The man in charge counsels the entire group in a strict tone of voice.

"I'm not saying to discard your individuality entirely in the face of society and you're free to express yourself. But what I'm trying to say is that once you enter society, you must never forget to be considerate of the feelings of others. Here we'll be conducting lessons that will have an effect on that sort of mindset. One of those lessons is Zazen. By holding your words and your actions in you will integrate yourself into the collective whole and be subsumed. Be considerate of others and finally think about it. What sort of person you are, what you are capable of".

Get it? As though saying that, the man in charge attentively directed his gaze at the Professor and then left.

"I have felt fear---no, I need to be careful".

He may not be able to ditch his dialect straight away but from now on, through repeatedly practicing Zazen, the Professor may be able to reflect on himself. On why he slipped into that dialect just now, that is.

The groups each take their seats and we received a simple explanation in this very room.

In this place, known as a Zazendo, we need to ball our fist, be it the left or the right one, and clutch it with the other hand at all times, whether we're walking or standing.

And we'll need to keep it at around the height of our solar plexus. It's a stance known as Shasyu.

Depending on which school we're talking about, you may need to use a specific hand to do the clutching but those schools and the such probably don't apply here.

Then we received one more explanation regarding Zazen. That Zazen is nothing more than a form of meditation. Practicing Zazen isn't about emptying your head but rather forming an image.

That there's something known as the Ten Bulls that act as a method through which the image is visualized.

It's a series of ten illustrations that depict the road to Zen enlightenment. Since Zazen is a first for me too, I haven't experienced it before.

"After you sit cross-legged, place your legs on top of your thighs. Since the exam's outcome also depends on how well you can perform the lotus position, make sure you do the best you can".

"Oww.....is he for real? I can't get one leg up though.....".

"If you are unable to pull it off from the beginning, then you may opt for the half lotus position that you perform with one leg".

The man in charge demonstrated it himself to give us a sample of that too. I was able to cross my legs without much difficulty and so I chose to go with the lotus position.

From what I can see, it doesn't look like many students are able to pull it off surprisingly enough. As for Kouenji, who I've grown somewhat curious about.....he's casually crossing his legs for Zazen.

A small smile on his face, it looks like he's gone ahead and entered a state of Zen alone.

Since there doesn't seem to be anything in his posture worth correcting, the man in charge didn't make a big deal out of him going on ahead.

"That guy, he can do it if he puts his mind to it after all".

Beside me, having succeeded in performing the lotus position himself, Tokitou whispered that.

"It doesn't seem like he dislikes this sort of thing. For now that's a relief".

"No doubt about that".

The man in charge is a hard-faced man, but if it's Kouenji, it wouldn't be strange even if he refused to act without a trace of fear in him.

As the students understood what it is in general, Zazen time began. Since quite a bit of time was spent on the explanation, the first session was limited to about five minutes.

Cleaning and Zazen are done for the morning and since it's now around 7 o'clock, it's time for breakfast. But rather than the large cafeteria we used last night, we were instead taken outside.

There, a large, spacious area for meals had been prepared and there are even multiple kitchens. Several groups are already there.

"The school will be offering meals for today but starting from tomorrow, provided the weather is clear, you will have to cook your own meals with your group. As for the amount and how to share it, you'll have to discuss it amongst yourselves".

"Seriously? I've never cooked a meal before though".

Ishizaki muttered but there's no dodging this one since that's the rule. Preparations for breakfast continued on while we received instructions on how to cook starting from tomorrow onwards.

The breakfast menu's already been confirmed and apparently manuals on how to cook them will be distributed. Looks like we won't have to worry about not knowing what to cook.

"Geh, is this all.....?".

The menu is a simple one, a Japanese breakfast based on rice, soup and main dishes. But students with big appetites would understandably see it as being insufficient.

For the record, it looks like we can substitute this meal with something else but in that case we'll have to prepare the substitute ourselves.

"Thank god for the uninhabited island experience. Compared to that, I'd take this one any day".

As though he's somehow at peace, Keisei eats his breakfast.

"If we're going to do it fairly, then how about each school year has a go at it?".

In the middle of breakfast, a 3rd year boy who looked like a leader turned towards Nagumo and made his proposal for the breakfast rotations.

"That's right. No objections here. I'd like to start it off with the 1st years".

"How about it, 1st years? Any objections?".

There's no way anyone could say they object in a situation like this.

Assuming the remaining days will all have clear weather, the number of times we'll need to cook breakfast would be six times.

The order in which we'll be cooking is different but that's no reason for discontent.

It's not something you'd naturally accept as a kouhai, but it's not really something that shouldn't just shut up and accept either.

"Understood. Please go with that".

Our leader, Keisei, accepted that.

"Since we'll be cooking breakfast, what time do we have to get up tomorrow?".

"...just in case we should wake up two hours in advance".

Ishizaki vigorously shoots down Keisei's proposal. To wake up two hours in advance means waking up after 4 o'clock and making preparations to head out.

"Still, we've got no choice but to do it. It'll be disastrous if we fail to prepare breakfast".

"Then you guys do it. I'll be sleeping".

Ishizaki normally didn't have much authority under Ryuen but here in this

group he's risen to the top of the hierarchy. It's interesting that he's making declarations like this the moment his position changed.

Being celebrated as one of the people who overthrew Ryuen may also be a cause of that. I don't particularly feel like confronting Ishizaki, who kept on acting bullishly despite knowing the truth. Because there's also the fact that he coincidentally happened to be placed in my group, which left him quite shaken mentally. Every time he makes a decision, it's not just other people he's hurting but also himself.

Ishizaki and Albert aren't cut out to be leaders or strategists.

They're more suited towards being the third-in-command and rallying the other students. As a matter of fact, Ryuen should have left them in that position.

Keisei and Yahiko too, are similar in that regard. They're not as foolhardy as Ishizaki but they really aren't cut out for a position where they'd have to lead others.

I had expected Class B to be more actively involved but they've been unusually quiet until now and they're continuing to stand by watchfully. Perhaps they lack initiative. More than I had expected. With the exception of students like Kanzaki or Shibata, that is.

In which case, as I suspected, Hashimoto's the one best suited towards uniting this group.

He possesses both the prestige of being in Class A as well as the ability to assess the situation. Also, the fact that he's able to make decisions while taking others into account to a certain extent might be crucial for this group.

However, I don't really feel like he's willing to lead the group himself though.

The morning's plain, no, healthy breakfast is over and lessons began in earnest. The large groups all gathered in a classroom that's slightly more spacious than the ones back at the Advanced Nurturing High School.

I wonder if it's made to resemble a university classroom? In particular, there isn't any order to our seating and we're free to sit wherever we want, beside whoever we want.

Inevitably enough, everyone ended up sitting with their small groups from the same school year. You could sit alone in the corner of the classroom if you wanted to but doing so would attract attention to you from the other school years and depending on the circumstances, you might even receive a warning.

Since the 2nd year and 3rd year small groups have yet to arrive, we 1st years have free reign to choose our seats.

"In this case.....would it be better for us to sit up front?"

"No, it'll save us trouble if we wait before taking our seats. Shouldn't we just wait for the seniors to take their seats first and sit wherever's free afterwards?"

Looks like Keisei doesn't want to run the risk of selfishly taking the seats at the back and getting chewed out for it after.

"You better not go off and do your own thing, Kouenji. Can't have you sitting wherever you please alone after all".

"As long as the seats are free, I believe I can sit wherever I please though".

Despite saying that, he showed no sign of selfishly taking a seat somewhere. So it's not like he's the type of man to ignore any and all rules after all.

He's also usually quiet in our daily lessons. Kouenji probably has his own set of rules.

"You seem to be struggling, 1st years".

Spotting us, one of the 2nd years called out to us.

"If you're having trouble, would you like me to lend you a hand?".

"No, we're fine.....".

Keisei bowed slightly in response to the pressure of one of our seniors offering his help.

"Hah.....why do I have to be the leader?".

Greeting each and every one of the 2nd and 3rd years is also one of the things that a leader ought to do. As a result of that, he seems to be under an immense amount of stress.

If I leave him this way.....it might only be a matter of time.

4

PE classes are held in the afternoon, or rather, I should say that basic physical conditioning takes place in the afternoon.

According to the briefing, the main focus will be on marathon training and it also looks like a long-distance relay race is scheduled for the last day.

It'll probably be one of the things tested. It seems we'll be practicing outdoors for a few days and then on the race track.

"Hah, haah".

Keisei is panting.

There were many tasks, going back all the way to the morning, that exhausted us physically and so he's struggling.

If it had been something like studying, which is more knowledge oriented, then I may have been able to offer him some advice but when it comes to something like basic physical conditioning, there's not much I can do but

watch.

On the other hand, Ishizaki and Albert aren't really the cigarette smoking delinquent type and they're physically stronger than the average student so they're able to perform these tasks without much trouble.

"...I've only been analyzing things since morning".

Somehow, I feel like I'm getting tired of my current state. Leaving aside whether or not I'm going to take any action, it's probably because I feel that I should at least raise the group's standards so that we don't end up becoming candidates for expulsion.

If we come in at last place and fall below the borderline established by the school then Keisei will be expelled. The probability of me being dragged down along with him is extremely low but that still isn't a guarantee.

Because I may yet incur his resentment for not extending a helping hand despite knowing of his struggle.

Should I provide the minimum backup required to keep him from receiving a red card? Or should I take a certain degree of action to send this group skyrocketing?

Or perhaps I should just hope that this problem resolves itself and keep on observing?

I quickly ruled out the option of observing inside my head.

The presence of Kouenji will probably cause anxieties in the future as well. I suppose I should hurry up and make a move. I slowed down and joined Kouenji, who's running nonchalantly behind me. Even as I approached him, Kouenji did not so much as spare me a glance.

Looks like he won't take a single step outside of his own world unless I give

him a knock.

"Hey, Kouenji. Would you mind treating them a little more mildly?".

"By them, are you referring to the group, Ayanokouji Boy?".

"Yeah. The other students are in a state of confusion. Not everyone's as incredible as you are".

"Ha. Ha. Ha. Certainly I am a one and only unique existence. However, don't you think it's the height of stupidity for me to slow down just so the masses can keep up?".

"Well.....I don't know what's right and what's not.....".

"What are you thinking of doing?".

"I'm thinking it'd be great if the group's able to achieve a relatively good score. I'd like to avoid expulsion".

"If you desire that then you'll have no other choice but to work for it, right?".

"For the record, I'm talking to you now because I intend on working for it".

Our feet. I could hear the sound of them stomping down on the ground. Kouenji seems to have immediately returned to his own world and so he didn't respond.

As I thought, it's impossible.

When it comes to Kouenji, half-assed threats and appeals are meaningless. Looking back on our school life until now, that much is clear.

Even if all the students, or perhaps the teachers, were to try persuading him, if his answer to that is a 'No' then that's a definite 'No'.

He's just that type.

Perhaps it's because this is the first day of our lessons, since despite our exhausting marathon training the rest of our lessons consisted only of explanations regarding this school and what will be taking place during the rest of the week. The majority of the lessons consisted of something along those lines. However, it's made abundantly clear that what we will be learning is 'sociality'.

But even if it's put that way to them, the 1st year students probably won't get it. The senior students are acting calm. Apparently the experience gap between the 1st years and the 2nd years is an insurmountable one.

"Uuu.....".

Our final lesson for the afternoon, Zazen, just ended but Keisei collapsed right there and then, unable to move.

"Are you alright?".

The first day. Brought to a close with Zazen.

"I'm fine, is what I'd like to say but my legs feel numb...please give me a moment".

Looks like this has been an unexpectedly hard lesson for Keisei. For about two minutes, he remained stiff and still while waiting out the numbness in his legs. Among the other students, it appears Ishizaki too, had a hard time with Zazen as he leaned forward in pain.

"Shit, eat and bath. Yeah, bath. Give me a hand here, Albert".

Albert silently came over and lifted Ishizaki up by his arm.

"Geh! Do it more gently! Let go".

Slam. Ishizaki collapsed.

"Gaaaah!".

Seeing that little interaction play out, I ended up thinking it seemed fun. However, the other students in our group could only see Ishizaki and them as parasites. Keisei too, ignored them and moved to leave and so I daringly stood my ground.

"They're an amusing bunch, aren't they?".

I daringly said so and drew Keisei's attention.

"It's better to leave them be, Kiyotaka. They're just fooling around. If you don't want to draw their attention, it's best not to look at them".

Keisei said so, trying to obstruct my field of view.

"He might not be as bad as Sudou but Ishizaki is also the type of guy to hit first and ask questions later. It might end up being Ryuen all over again, you know".

"Still, we're in the same group. I'm sure they'll be fine with a certain degree of contact, won't they?".

I pointed. And Ishizaki, noticing us, glared back. Keisei cowered for a moment but Ishizaki quickly dragged Albert and left the dojo.

"What?".

"...you're surprisingly brave, Kiyotaka".

In truth, it's because I already knew all about the true state of affairs between Ishizaki and his group but I'd like to let them know, indirectly, that drawing attention to that here is inadvisable. As long as Keisei is the leader, controlling students from other classes will be essential, to a degree.

"Keisei, we may have to peel off another layer here at this outdoor school".

"A layer? What do you mean?".

"It means we'll have to befriend Ishizaki and Albert too. At least to a certain extent".

"That's absurd. I'll admit we're in the same group but we're essentially enemies here. No matter what, befriending them isn't something I can do. Because this isn't the last special exam we'll be going through after all".

There is no reason for us to get along with them. That's what Keisei is saying. I felt the same way too at first after enrolling here. As a matter of fact, this school thrives through that kind of conflict. However, recently I've started feeling that there may be another way besides that.

"I hear the student council president Nagumo's succeeded in uniting the classes".

"That's---just his charisma. It's because he's special. I don't have that sort of talent.....no, I don't think that's a feat anyone from the other classes would be able to pull off either, right? In the first place, we still don't know if Nagumo-senpai's method will hold out until graduation or not. I don't know what he has in mind but no matter how much they get along the only ones who will be getting the last laugh in are the students who graduate from Class A in the end. The other classes will just end up in tears".

Keisei said so and left the dojo.

6

It happened after dinner, when I had decided to go back to my room ahead of the others.

Perhaps there's some sort of trouble in the corridor, as I could see several boys and girls crowded together.

"Sorry, sorry. Are you ok?".

"Yes...no need for concern".

Yamauchi from our class apologetically extended his hand. The person who fell appears to be Sakayanagi Arisu from the 1st years' Class A.

Sakayanagi did not take Yamauchi's hand, rather, she tried to get back up on her own.

It doesn't seem like she's able to get back up on her own, as she grasped her cane.

Then, leaning on the wall, she slowly got back up. It was only a short period of time between her fall and her standing back up.

However, in a situation like this where she'd attract attention from her surroundings, Sakayanagi must have felt that an extremely long amount of time has passed.

Yamauchi awkwardly drew his hand back and left behind these words.

"Then, umm, I'll be off?".

"Yes. Please don't concern yourself with me".

Sakayanagi gave a slight smile and averted her eyes from Yamauchi.

Both boys and girls felt relief at the fact that it didn't turn into a problem before scattering.

"Really though, Sakayanagi-chan is cute but isn't she clumsy?".

Yamauchi did not even entertain the possibility that it was his carelessness that caused the collision.

"Are you alright?".

Somehow, since our eyes made contact, I approached Sakayanagi and called out to her.

"Thank you for your concern but it's not a big deal".

"I'll give Yamauchi an earful later".

"It's not like he deliberately did it, I only fell once at most".

Sakayanagi laughed thinly at that but her eyes weren't laughing one bit.

"Well then, please excuse me".

Since they were in different groups, Kamuro, who's usually always by her side, isn't here.

I have no way of knowing what sort of battles are taking place on the girls' side and I have no interest towards it either.

But Sakayanagi, who had walked off, stopped and looked back.

Did she notice that I had been staring?

"I just remembered now that I have something to discuss with you, Ayanokouji-kun".

Tapping her cane once, she gave a faint smile.

"Class B certainly is a unified class. You could say that this is because Ichinose Honami-san has earned the trust of her comrades by giving it her all up until now. However, is it really fine to trust her so much, is what I'm thinking".

"This sounds like something that has nothing to do with me".

But Sakayanagi continued on without even a hint of paying attention to what I had to say.

"A while back, there was this sort of rumor about her. That she possesses a tremendous amount of points. That despite her not yet having accomplished anything significant in the special exams until now, she possesses enough points to warrant an investigation from the school. That honestly surprised me. However, is it normal for one to earn that many points? In all likelihood, don't you think she's acting as Class B's safe?"

"I wonder. The only ones who'd know that for sure would be Ichinose herself, or her classmates. What meaning can there possibly be in telling me something

like this?".

"What I'm trying to say is.....whether or not it's really fine to entrust all those private points to her. For instance, if due to a mistake she's made, she's fallen into a predicament where a massive sum of points would be necessary and she used them to protect herself, or using those accumulated points in order to save a classmate. These are actions that nobody can blame her for in all likelihood. You could say that her acting as their safe is for that purpose".

"It's probably that".

"However.....if she were to use that massive sum of points selfishly for her own pleasure, then the school may make a move on the basis that it's fraud".

In any case, this is something that's relevant to the students of Class B other than Ichinose and not me.

If she truly is acting as their safe, the only ones who have the right to complain about that are the students who deposited it with her.

"I doubt Ichinose will use up private points for her own sake though".

"Yes, that is true. At the very least, for now nobody's doubting her".

In other words, from this point onwards, there will be suspicion cast on her, is what she's trying to say.

"I am looking forward to when we return to the school after this exam ends".

Perhaps she's satisfied after saying what she had to say from start to finish, Sakayanagi walked off without so much as looking back.

One hour left to go until lights out at 10 o'clock. In our shared room, without much to say to one another, we passed the time in silence. The trigger for everyone to get along with each other is a hard one. Even if you suddenly started speaking to someone from another class, they'll just wonder what you're even putting in the effort for and so it's difficult to strike up a conversation.

It would be great if someone took the initiative to give us a topic to converse about but that seems hopeless.

At that moment, someone lightly knocked on the door. Looks like we have a visitor.

"Who is it? At a time like this".

Doesn't seem like anyone knows and so everyone curiously looked at the door.

"Might be a teacher".

Ishizaki indifferently said so. Certainly that's a possibility. Keisei got up and started walking while asking who's knocking. The person on the other side truly is someone unexpected.

"Are you guys still up?".

"President Nagumo, can we help you with something?".

"I came to check on you guys since we're in the same group. Can I come in?".

There isn't a single 1st year brave enough to say 'no' after having heard that. Keisei immediately gave his consent and welcomed Nagumo into the room. But apparently he didn't come alone. He's accompanied by Vice President Kiriya as well as two 3rd year students.

One of them is a student from Class B named Tsunoda and the other, Ishikura, is also from Class B. Upon entering the room, Nagumo surveyed his

surroundings.

"As expected, they made the room the same way you did, senpai".

Nagumo smiled and said so to Ishikura.

"Looks like it. So? How are you planning on deepening the ties between us by dragging us all the way to the 1st years' room?"

He asked Nagumo but Keisei, not quite having comprehended the situation, asked Nagumo.

"Deepening ties?"

"I told you, didn't I? I came to check on you guys since we're in the same group. We don't have any televisions or PCs or cell phones here. To be honest with you guys, there's nothing remotely similar to entertainment here. But it's not like we have absolutely nothing to play with".

Saying that, Nagumo brought out a small box from inside the pocket of his jersey.

"Cards?"

"Playing cards in this day and age? I'm sure that's what you're thinking. But this is a staple of training camps much like this one".

Nagumo casually sat down in a vacant spot. And then he peeled the vinyl tape off the sealed box, opening it.

"Please take your seats too, senpai. Sorry 1st years but since there isn't much space, please go back to your beds".

Nagumo stopped the 1st years who were taking their seats and said that.

"I'm not doing this".

Tsunoda declined and turned his back.

"Please don't say that, let's do it. We may be able to talk about things we can't discuss anywhere else".

Having been stopped like that, Tsunoda resignedly took his seat. After him, Ishikura too, took his seat.

"To liven up the game, I'm thinking we should bet something on it. I'm looking for some good ideas".

The 1st years, already nervous given that they're dealing with a senior student, couldn't give out any ideas right away. It's probably mostly because they don't know what they should and should not say to the student council president.

Nagumo too, knows that the 1st years would naturally shrink back like this.

"We've decided on the order in which we'll cook breakfast, right? Why don't we go back to that as a starting point and bet that on this? If you keep losing again and again then in the worst case scenario, you'll have to cook breakfast up until the day this training camp ends. On the other hand, if you don't lose at all then you won't have to cook breakfast even once. That's what I'm trying to say".

"Oi, Nagumo. Isn't that something we should discuss with the whole group?".

Ishikura called out to him.

"It's just the order in which we cook breakfast. Please give me some leeway with this at least".

Since he's acting as student council president of this school, he unreservedly spoke his wishes even to his seniors. On the other hand, it doesn't look like the 3rd years can act too tough when dealing with Nagumo. Knowing of the showdown between him and Horikita Manabu, they probably don't want to muddy the waters by intervening clumsily.

"Got it. Let's play cards and decide".

"We're fine with this too, right?".

Keisei, with some slight reservation, turned towards the 1st years in the room and asked.

Ishizaki, Hashimoto and the others all gave small nods as though in consent. I did the same too. And then the remaining students nodded, with a slight delay. With the sole exception of Kouenji.

"Kouenji, you object to using playing cards to decide?".

It would have been fine to just ignore him but Nagumo boldly spoke to Kouenji. In the gymnasium, during the afternoon, their little back-and-forth there may have something to do with this.

"I neither approve nor disapprove. The majority vote already seems to have given you the answer".

"It has nothing to do with numbers. I want you to tell me what you think".

"Then allow me to answer you, student council president. I don't have the slightest interest in this interaction. To consent or to object. I haven't even thought of such things. Does this satisfy you?".

Kouenji's remarks sound like they'll cause problems again. However, Nagumo gave a pleasant laugh and unexpectedly said this to Kouenji.

"Why don't you join the student council, Kouenji? I'd like to welcome someone as interesting as you into it. From what I hear, you're quite capable too when it comes to academics and sports".

Everyone in the room, including the 3rd years, were shocked at this. No, Kouenji's the only one whose expression didn't change.

"It's unfortunate. I have no interest in the student council".

"I suppose so. But know that you're welcome anytime. If the student council happens to catch your interest, feel free to call me anytime".

It looks like Nagumo didn't expect Kouenji to accept immediately from the very beginning.

"Now then, shall we play cards?".

Nagumo averted his eyes from Kouenji and once again proposed that to us.

"What exactly will we be playing?".

"Let's see, why don't we just play Old Maid? The last one to hold the Joker loses. Two from each school year will participate. Six of us in total for this match".

I'm not very familiar with playing cards but Old Maid is something even I know about.

"Participating students are free to switch out. But please just don't do so when we're in the middle of the game".

Nagumo said so and started shuffling the cards. And once he's done doing that he handed them over to the 3rd years. To ensure there's no cheating going on, he handed them over to the 1st years as well.

Keisei, while shuffling the cards, looked for one more student who'd be willing to participate. Since no one volunteered, Hashimoto resignedly raised his hand and came down from his bed.

And just like that, the game of Old Maid started. The players being 1st years, 2nd years and 3rd years. Being made to cook breakfast entails waking up early. Since each school year is scheduled for two turns each, being able to win 5 rounds and lose only 1 would lead to a favourable outcome. In the worst case scenario, winning 4 rounds and losing 2 would still be acceptable.

"Playing cards in silence isn't really fun so let's chat".

Nagumo proposed that.

Having received the deck that Keisei had shuffled, Nagumo started dealing out the cards.

"I'll be dealing the cards for the first round but starting from the second round onwards, the loser will have to shuffle and deal out the cards".

Everyone nodded their consent. From the moment he entered this room until now, Nagumo has yet to look at me even once. It probably means that despite having made contact with me during the winter vacation, Nagumo doesn't really think much of me.

"Also, the 1st years who aren't playing should feel free to make yourselves at home. Being nervous around your seniors all the time will have an impact on you tomorrow".

He said that but still, we were unable to kick back and relax like we had been doing a while ago. Kouenji alone slept, not paying any attention.....

From the bottom bunk, I decided to observe the game being played.

"Even if this is only a game, it's not like the 1st years can just afford to lose, senpai".

"Unfortunately, I'm not the lucky type. Don't count on me too much".

"It'll be fine, senpai. Because I think you're all relatively strong. You're not bad enough to lose both the first and the second round".

Despite it being a game of cards where one doesn't know what hand they'll be dealt, Nagumo's still brimming with confidence.

The first round proceeded smoothly and soon enough they were halfway through the game.

"Done".

The 3rd year, Ishikura, succeeded in ridding himself of all his cards. Vice

President Kiriya was next and then Nagumo finished third. The 2nd years' victory was decided early on, putting more pressure on the 1st years.

"Done".

Hashimoto bowed towards the 3rd years and brought forth two cards of the same value. Now the only remaining players are Keisei and Tsunoda from the 3rd years.

I felt the mood was rather tense for a game but still, they calmly proceeded. Two cards left in Keisei's hand and a card left in the 3rd year's hand. In other words, Keisei's the one holding the Joker. If the 3rd year ends up picking the Joker, then that would mean Keisei wins. However.....the card that Tsunoda picked after some deliberation happened to be the winning card.

"Alright, this clinches it".

"I lost".

The first round ended with Keisei's defeat and with that, the 1st years are now saddled with the task of making breakfast once.

"Let's calm down. Just losing once or twice doesn't mean anything".

Hashimoto said that to Keisei as though cheering him up. Keisei replies with a nod but he seemed apologetic about having lost. He may be thinking about the possibility of losing another round.

"I told you earlier, didn't I? The loser has to gather up the cards and deal them out".

"I-I'm sorry".

Keisei, who forgot that, panickedly picked up the cards. The second round started soon after. From my position, I could see the hand of the one of the 3rd years. He's holding a Joker.

He kept the Joker until halfway through the game but after some time, it

passed to a different student.

And then...the remaining two players ended up being Kiriya and Keisei. Now that he's engaged in a one-on-one for the second time in a row, it looks like Keisei couldn't help himself and ended up getting nervous. To top it off, judging from the number of cards remaining, I could tell that Keisei's the one holding the Joker. Hesitantly, the 2nd year, Kiriya, slowly grasped a card. Keisei did his best to keep up a poker face but seeing the card that's being taken from him, his face fell. And within the span of a few minutes, the 1st years suffered consecutive defeats.

Yahiko, who had been assessing the situation, signalled Keisei for a switch.

"Maybe it's better if you switched".

After those words came from Nagumo, Keisei obediently switched out with Yahiko.

"I'm not very good at playing games like this. I'm sorry but I'm leaving it to you".

Keisei, who bears the responsibility for the consecutive losses, observed the 1st years' battle from behind. Of course, even Yahiko would be nervous when facing down his seniors. However, perhaps it has something to do with him usually treating Katsuragi as a senior, he seems rather calm. Still, that might not have much of an effect on the outcome of the game. I don't know how much skill factors into a game like this but you'd need a tremendous amount of luck to not draw the Joker.

"I'm starting to feel like giving the 1st years this one".

Nagumo said, perhaps feeling sorry since he had been winning consecutively.

"By the way, Ishikura-senpai, how's the club doing?".

"You don't have any interest in basketball, do you?".

"No such thing. Of course, my interest in it isn't to the extent of my interest in soccer though".

"This year we've had some athletic 1st years joining so we may be able to expect great things next year. We didn't really achieve much this year after all. It's pathetic to admit this as the captain though".

There are several 1st years who have joined the basketball club but in all likelihood, he's referring to Sudou when he spoke of athletic 1st years.

Sudou's hard work seems to have attracted the attention of even a retired 3rd year.

"I'm looking forward to that".

"You seem to be focusing solely on the student council though. Don't you have any lingering feelings for soccer?".

"It's not like I was aiming to make it as a professional. Besides, I can continue playing soccer wherever I want. It's just that the role of student council president at this school is really attractive for me".

"It's great that you're working hard at the student council but I have misgivings about you picking fights with Horikita".

"Picking a fight is not my intent. I want to be acknowledged by my senpai who I've idolized for a long time now. Those pure feelings are all I have".

Ishikura gave Nagumo a glance but then immediately turned back towards his cards.

"I'm first this time around".

Smoothly losing all his cards, Ishikura ended up as the first victor.

"I'm done too".

Right afterwards, Yahiko also seems to have gotten his cards in order as he happily discarded his last two cards.

In order for the 1st years to win, everything now rides on Hashimoto. His cards seem to be steadily decreasing but in the end, what's really important is the Joker and who's holding it.

"Alright".

After the 2nd year senior who finished third, Hashimoto also finished up.

"Oh, the 1st years have won for the first time. Congratulations".

"Thank you very much, Nagumo-senpai".

The ones left in the end are the student council president, Nagumo, and Tsunoda from the 3rd year. However, Nagumo has the advantage. There's a 50% chance this concludes the match.

"Well then, excuse me".

Nagumo said that as he grasped the card on the right without any hesitation.

However, what he ended up grabbing was the Joker.

"Too bad".

The 3rd year, Tsunoda, picked the card on the right just like Nagumo did earlier when Nagumo extended the two cards in his hand.

"This clinches it".

As a result, the Joker was left in Nagumo's possession and the 2nd years ended up suffering a defeat.

"I've been beaten. Then shall we go for a fourth round?".

Nagumo, without any bitterness, made preparations for a fourth round.

"The 1st years have won for the first time with this. How about I have you lose again? You're our juniors after all, so I'd like you to take over our duties".

Saying that, Nagumo began dealing out the cards.

"If I recall, Sudou's from Class D, isn't he? Who's from Class D here?"

While the cards are being dealt out, Ishikura asked that and looked over towards the 1st years.

"Ahh, we're Sudou's classmates".

Keisei said so while glancing at me. And then he immediately added this.

"Just one thing, starting from this month we've been promoted to Class C".

One wouldn't normally care much for the affairs of a school year that's not theirs. But when Keisei said that, Ishikura was impressed while looking surprised.

"So you've been promoted from Class D to Class C, huh? That's impressive".

"Of course, not too long after enrolling, this year's Class D ran out of class points though".

"And you still got yourselves promoted to Class C. Good going there. How large's the gap between you and Class B?"

When Ishikura asked that, Keisei stopped answering.

"Please forget it. This is a group comprised of all the classes. It's my bad for bringing an incendiary topic into this".

He apologized. Certainly, this isn't a topic to bring up in a place like this. For Ishizaki and the others from Class D who fell behind us, and for Class B, this surely isn't a fun topic to discuss.

As a result, the 1st years barely joined the conversation and most of it revolved around Nagumo and the 3rd years. The fourth round. When four out of six people finished up, Nagumo called for a stop.

"The remaining players are two 1st years, huh? There's no need to play this to the end anymore, right?"

No matter who wins, it doesn't change the fact that the 1st years will lose. Yahiko and Hashimoto put the remaining cards back into the deck. Even though we've managed to beat the 2nd years led by Nagumo once, the 1st years still lost thrice. Initially, we'd only have to cook breakfast twice. But thanks to this game of Old Maid, that number's increased.

If we lose again, we'd be burdened with even more.

"Shall we switch?"

Hashimoto requested a switch with another 1st year and stepped down. There probably aren't many 1st years willing to play with this gloomy mood going on.

"I don't want to waste time. It doesn't matter who, just join. You there".

I had been observing the match when Nagumo looked at me and beckoned me over. Of course, I'd like to decline but this isn't exactly a situation where I can afford to do so.

Regardless of whether he intentionally picked me or randomly picked me, I should probably accept.

"Sorry, Ayanokouji. I'm counting on you".

"Sure".

Three of the 1st years have already played so it's not really strange even if I happened to be picked.

Besides, this is just for fun, just a game and it's just about who wins and who loses. As we switched, Yahiko asked me to deal out the cards. Shuffling the cards, I dealt them out awkwardly.

"Alright then, this is the fifth round. I'd like to beat the 3rd years too. Let's put our backs into this, 1st years".

Nagumo gave rough words of encouragement. I looked at the cards in my hand and assessed the situation. When I did, several of those cards had the same value but I also ended up drawing the Joker.

As long as I don't do something to push this onto the 2nd years or 3rd years, I stand no chance of winning.

I'm not very familiar with playing cards but there's something I'm curious about. In a way, having drawn the Joker right away may turn out to be a good thing. After the check, the match started right away. The game proceeded turn by turn but there's no sign of anyone drawing the Joker from me.

Occasionally, a senior would grasp the Joker but then they'd immediately let go. However, on the fifth turn, the Joker was finally drawn from my hand. The senior who drew it looked at me for an instant but then immediately regained his calm and continued with the game.

This time around, Yahiko's the first one to finish up and I finished second after him.

"So the 1st years got the drop on us, eh? Maybe the tides have turned".

In the end, it boiled down to two 3rd years going against each other. Or should I say, everything went as Nagumo had hoped. One round left. As a 1st year, I'd like to avoid losing anymore than we already have.

"Next round's the final one".

"I'll start dealing".

As Ishikura started dealing out the cards, Kouenji called out to Nagumo.

"President Nagumo".

"What's the matter, Kouenji? Do you finally feel like joining in?".

"I'm feeling a bit curious. I suppose I'll see how this final game plays out".

He said so arrogantly but Nagumo paid no mind to that and only listened to what he had to say.

"How it'll play out?".

Nagumo, while looking at the cards being dealt out, glanced once at the participants.

"This may be a game, but they're still up against experienced senior students. There's a good chance the 1st years will lose".

He answered. And with that, Kouenji laughed and closed his eyes as though in satisfaction.

In all likelihood, the majority of the people here failed to understand the meaning behind Kouenji's question. Only the senior students seem to have grasped the situation. I racked my brains thinking about what I should do in regards to this fight. If I rely only on luck, then I'm practically guaranteed to lose. However, if I take action to avoid such an outcome, I may end up drawing Nagumo's attention. I checked my cards.

One of those cards is a card that I'll definitely have to lose if I'm to win. It's the Joker that spells defeat.

"As for the 1st years, I'd like to finish them off with three losses. But four losses also works for me".

Nagumo's words don't sound like he's just randomly saying them. The final round starts in a clockwise direction. The players discard two cards each.

In about 1-2 minutes, the outcome will probably be decided.

"Sorry 1st years, but I'm done".

The first one to finish up is Tsunoda. Kiriya finished next after him. The

remaining players are the two 1st years and the seniors, Nagumo and Ishikura. The Joker's been in my hand from the start. In the end, I decided to give up on winning. I simply continued to play the game silently without doing much.

Yahiko finished and he gave a breath of relief. And soon after that, Ishikura also finished leaving me in a one-on-one against Nagumo.

"You don't seem to be having fun, Ayanokouji".

"That's not true. I just have trouble expressing myself".

"Really? You've been looking pale from the start. You've been holding the Joker all this time, haven't you?".

Nagumo's remarks aren't really anything out of the ordinary. Since it's a one-on-one, if he's not holding the Joker then he'd obviously understand what that entails.

"That might just be the case".

Conversing with him would just be troublesome and so I brushed it off.

Because I know that's not what Nagumo wants to coax out of me. In short, I think he wants to get me to talk back to him the way Kouenji did. I silently extended two cards towards him. One of them is the Joker and the other card's the winning one for Nagumo.

In all likelihood, Nagumo will draw the winning card. No, I don't get this expression he's making. Nagumo smiled as he reached out. And then---

"Good for you, Ayanokouji. Now you have a way out".

Nagumo picked the Joker.

"Now this is unusual. I thought you'd surely be able to pick the right one".

Ishikura said so from beside Nagumo.

"A game of cards ultimately boils down to luck after all. I'll lose when I lose".

Shuffling the cards in his hands, he extended two cards towards me.

"Now then, take your pick".

From a third party perspective, there's a 50/50 chance. But that doesn't really apply for this game. These cards came from a sealed box but Nagumo is the one who first shuffled these cards and in that moment, he must have marked the Joker. He's used a trick.

You wouldn't notice at first glance but there's a small marking on the Joker. You wouldn't notice it normally. I unravelled this mystery based on something along the lines of a prediction.

So far, in all the five rounds that he's played, Nagumo's been correctly guessing the outcomes in advance. Of course, since there are also 1st years who don't know anything mixed in as well, there's no real sense of certainty. That's why he spoke ambiguously and only guessed the outcome in terms of teams with a high probability of winning and teams with a low probability of winning.

But the senior students who have realized.....no, who have been told about this trick possess an overwhelming advantage. Either way, this is disgusting.

The card on the right from my point of view has a mark on it that indicates it's the Joker. There's no mistaking it since it's a rushed, makeshift marking that was not applied to the other cards. If I pick the other card here, I wonder what'll happen. The answer to that is simple. Nothing will happen. It would just mean I got the winning half of the 50/50 chance.

"I really can't tell which one's which so I'll just randomly pick one".

I said so and reached out but Nagumo pulled the cards away.

"Please give it some thought before picking".

"I don't think it's possible to tell just by thinking about it though".

"Still, I insist".

He compelled me to give it some thought halfway through.

"Understood, I'll think about it".

I said so as I looked at the cards. Of course, I no longer gave the cards themselves any further thought. I kept quiet for about two seconds and then reached out for the winning card.

"I like my chances with the one on the right. I'll be picking that one".

A reason as good as any.

This time, Nagumo didn't stop me. The last winning card came into my hands.

"Please excuse me".

I said so as I put together the two cards and declared my victory.

"You've lost, Nagumo".

"So it would seem. I mean, we were scheduled to cook breakfast twice in the first place anyways so I don't really mind".

He said that and then gathered the cards scattered around.

"Still, it was fairly amusing. As I thought, Ishikura-senpai and I get along well".

"...I wonder".

Brushing aside Nagumo's words of courtesy, Ishikura left the room.

"There's no problem with starting the order in which we cook breakfast with the 1st years, is there? Please take care of it tomorrow".

"U-Understood. Thank you for tonight".

Keisei thanked Nagumo. The senior students who have finished playing cards got up and left the 1st year room.

"Doesn't feel like we've interacted with them that much".

I could understand why Ishizaki would mutter that.

Ultimately, it only amounted to a game that increased the 1st years' burden by a bit.

Chapter 3: Premonition of defeat

On a Saturday, which would have been a holiday in our school life, there are still lessons being held for the duration of the outdoors school.

But even though I call them lessons, the timetable itself differs somewhat from the weekdays.

What could be referred to as lessons ended with the morning and after that is our own free time.

The special exam that began on Thursday too, is already on its third day.

Discord began to occur within the group.

It started around 5 o'clock in the early morning.

"Aaaah, I'm fucking sleepy!".

At the outdoor cookhouse near the school building, Ishizaki screamed.

"Everyone's in the same boat. Ahh, please measure it so you don't mess up the amount of miso".

Keisei warns him while flipping through the paper on which the breakfast menu was written that the teachers had given us.

"Shut it. Why do I have to participate in cooking the meals in the first place?".

Even as he moved his hands to stir the miso, Ishizaki did not stop cursing.

"It can't be helped, right? There's the possibility we'll incur a penalty if everyone isn't assembled here".

"Hell if I care, shit.....ahh".

"What's with that 'ahh' just now?".

".....nothing".

"No way that was nothing. Where's the salt you had in your hands!?".

"I added it all".

Apparently, quite a bit of salt got added to the miso soup that Ishizaki was in charge of.

Keisei panickedly put out the fire and checked the taste. And then he coughed.

"You put too much in it, ugh! It's not drinkable.....".

If you gave that miso soup to the senior students, you'd get bashed severely for it.

In the first place, it's bad for your body.

"Nothing for it but to make it again".

"Don't fuck around. If we're making it again, then you start over from scratch. I mean, what about Kouenji?".

"Hell if I know".

"You're in the same damn class".

While glancing at the two of them quarreling over miso soup, Hashimoto skillfully handled a frying pan on top of the stove while cooking up an omelette.

"You're quite the dexterous one.....".

"It's because I always cook my own meals".

Hashimoto said so without a hint of pride and briskly continued cooking.

Albert approached Hashimoto silently. In his hands he carried a bowl with scrambled eggs in it.

"Thank you. If you don't mind, can I ask you to cut the vegetables too?".

Despite his large frame, Albert began skillfully swinging a kitchen knife on the chopping board.

Since there are a lot of mouths to feed, Hashimoto cooks the eggs one after another.

It appears, as far as cooking is concerned, these two are set to be our aces.

On the other hand, I managed to acquire the extremely undemanding task of preparing the raw vegetables and tableware.

However, since I have to prepare everyone's worth of vegetables, it's still a lot.

I can't help with the china but I feel like I should help out with cutting the vegetables too.

As I stood beside Albert, he looked at me silently and so I tried communicating with him via eye contact.

"Can you handle it? Cutting vegetables, I mean".

"Probably".

Somehow, we managed to understand one another sufficiently enough and he handed over the kitchen knife to me.

I'm glad I've utilized one before, even if only a little, since I had started living in the dorm.

I cut the vegetables, keeping up with Albert's proficiency.

Still, I wonder exactly where that Kouenji went off to.

It's already been more than 30 minutes since he said he'd be going to the toilet. Class A and Class B students each sent a single student to look for him but seeing as how they aren't back yet, it would appear they haven't found him.

In the end, Kouenji did not return until breakfast and even after he returned, he didn't even try to persistently make the excuse that he was stuck in the toilet due to a stomach ache.

As such, I should assume the relationship between Ishizaki and Kouenji has completely deteriorated.

1

3 o'clock in the morning of that very same Saturday, it happened while I was studying morals in the classroom. I could hear the cheerful voice of a girl from outside. When I peered out of the window from the 3rd floor, I could see the figure of Ichinose running energetically around the campus. She seemed to have had a difficult time putting together her group on the first day but the important thing is that she looks cheerful now.

Sakayanagi had declared her intention to crush Ichinose but so far there's no sign of that happening. Of course, that might only be on the surface.

Gazing down from above, I could tell who Ichinose's group members are to a certain extent. Surprisingly enough, I only spotted one person from our Class C among them. As for Class B, Ichinose's the only one there I recognized. Perhaps just like the boys have done, they're forming groups comprised of a majority class to maintain the four classes status quo and picked her from Class B to meet the minimum requirement.

I don't really know the students from Class A and Class B in detail but I also spotted the girl who collided with Horikita during the sports festival and sustained injuries as part of Ryuen's ploy.

Fortunately, it looks like she's made a complete recovery since she's now running without much difficulty. By the way, the student from our Class C who's

part of that group is a girl by the name of Wang Mei-Yu.

She had first come here from China back when she was an elementary school student and has remained in this country ever since. That's what I heard from someone in class. Her nickname is 'Mii-chan'.

A nickname that those not close to her would find difficult to call her by. As for what else I know about her, her grades are nothing short of extraordinary and she's particularly good at English...is the image I have of her.

Their overall grades may somewhat differ but no matter how you look at it, she's just as good as Keisei when it comes to academics. And also, strangely enough, she's similar to Keisei when it comes to sports as well. She's desperately trying to keep up with the rest of her group members, but she's by far the worst one. Even now, she's breathing hard while looking up at the sky like she's about to collapse. She's limping and swaying.

Ichinose noticed Mii-chan falling behind and slowed down. And while giving her support in the form of encouragements, she decided to run alongside her. And after a slight delay, yet another girl, Class D's Shiina Hiyori, also linked up with them.

She doesn't exactly look like the athletic type but with a smile on her face, she kept pace with the other two girls. According to what Ryuen and those around him have been saying, Shiina's been acting as the leader of the girls of Class D. If that is indeed the case then the group I'm seeing right now would have the leaders of two classes in it.

With this in mind, it wouldn't be strange for Horikita and Sakayanagi to be in the same group as one another, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

Now feeling a little curious about how exactly this group came to be, I took my eyes off the text I'm supposed to be studying and looked out the window. I could tell that the atmosphere in the classroom had become a heavy one due to the words that came from the teacher.

"I'll have the lot of you introduce yourselves now. However, I want you to keep in mind that this isn't just simply a self-introduction you'll be doing but that it's part of your lesson here. Every day henceforth, you will be giving a speech. The theme of the speech will differ from school year to school year but the four main criteria you'll be judged on are: 'Volume', 'Posture', 'Subject' and 'Communicativeness'".

The word speech had been written in the materials we had been given on the bus as well.

No doubt this is one of the subjects being examined here at the outdoor school. In all likelihood, everyone in this large group will have to come up with their own speech to give. For those with poor communication skills, this particular subject may seem nothing short of hellish.

The 1st years are told to give their speech based on what they've learned so far throughout this year and what they wish to learn in the following years. The 2nd and 3rd years are to give their speech based on matters like their future course and employment. Basically, things that have to do with their futures.

"Seriously? What a shitty exam.....".

I could understand why Ishizaki would say that disgustedly but his mutters are too loud. It appears the teacher heard that as well but he didn't give any words of rebuke.

Whether you choose to take this seriously or fool around, in the end your decisions will come back to affect the group. It probably means we're free to do as we wish.

After lessons, a certain man approached the 1st year group. Ishizaki had been resting his legs on the table but upon spotting that man, he spontaneously corrected his posture.

He's Kiriya from Class B of the 2nd years as well as the vice president of the

student council under Nagumo.

He used to be in Class A but after having been destroyed by Nagumo, he seems to have fallen. However, he still seems to desire Nagumo's downfall deep down inside as he's made contact with me through the older Horikita.

"I think you should fix your attitude towards these lessons".

"S-Sure. I mean, I wasn't really making any noise or anything".

"I'm not just talking about Ishizaki. I'm also talking about you, Kouenji".

Despite desiring his downfall, on the surface he has to act the part of the dutiful vice president. He probably wants to fix whatever could have an effect on the way the whole large group is evaluated.

"We're only going to be judged in this special exam based on the test we're taking on the last day, aren't we? Whether or not we take these lessons seriously isn't really that important, I think".

"The written exam isn't everything there is to this special exam. Have you not given any thought to the fact that your attitude throughout the training camp and the impression it gives might have an effect on it too? Besides, how exactly are you going to get a high score on the exam if you don't take these lessons seriously?"

"The answer is 'simple is best', right? Because it's me we're talking about".

"I see. So you're saying it's easy for you to get a high score then? However, we'll see after the exam whether or not you've managed to pull off a high score. As long as you're part of a group, don't you think it's important for you to act to alleviate the concerns of those around you?"

"If this is a group that would actually concern themselves over how I act, then I'd have to say this group isn't worth much".

"You don't get to judge that, Kouenji".

"Then who gets to make that judgement, may I ask?".

"The collective whole. That's something for every student here to decide".

Ishizaki sniggers while putting up with the vice president's words. He's probably rejoicing at seeing Kouenji being put down. However, Kouenji isn't someone that sort of 'common sense' would work on.

"Even if all of you were to be stacked on top of one another, I'm still worth far more as an individual human being. What I mean to say is that people without a good eye for things cannot hope to make a judgement like that".

"Looks like you're far too immature to be a high school student. How infantile".

Kiriyama wields common sense as a weapon against Kouenji, who didn't cower one bit before him. By the time I noticed, almost half the 2nd years are now crowding around where we 1st years are sitting.

Ishizaki too, couldn't afford to laugh forever and stiffened his expression. I could hear words that sounded slightly threatening coming from around us.

"Besides, it's not just Kouenji. I see other students here and there causing problems too".

Of course if we're talking about problem students that would naturally include Ishizaki but I honestly can't think of anyone else. Everyone else should've been taking the lessons seriously in their own way. Kiriyama's probably lumping all the 1st years together with the aim of getting us to focus. He's probably putting pressure on us by reminding us that we'll be making enemies out of the senior students if we continue acting arrogantly like this.

Kouenji's just the straw that broke the camel's back.

"Leave them be, Kiriyaama".

The 3rd year Ishikura saw the situation and offered a helping hand.

"Guidance that goes too far may be interpreted as bullying. If rumors like that spread, you're the one who's going to be in trouble. The 1st years have a good grip on the situation, don't they?".

When Ishikura asked us that question, everyone aside from Kouenji, including me, nodded.

"Bravo, Ishikura-senpai. You really grasped the situation well".

Nagumo, who had been silently watching this scene play out without joining the conversation, now happily started speaking.

"You're wasted on Class B. In the first place, Ishikura-senpai isn't really lucky".

"Isn't lucky, you say? I don't want to admit it but it's just that I wasn't good enough".

"I don't think that's the case. Senpai, the only reason you weren't able to climb your way up to Class A is because there's a genius like Horikita Manabu there. I'm aware you've put up a good fight throughout these 3 years. The class point difference between Class A and Class B is 312. Graduation isn't that far off but I think you're closing in on them".

"Then are you saying you're going to lead this group to victory?".

"Yep. If Ishikura-senpai's willing to entrust me with everything then we'll beat this special exam. And that's just a trifle because I'll help you climb your way up to Class A. We may even be able to get Horikita-senpai expelled from this school, you know?".

"Too bad, Nagumo. Horikita isn't the leader this time. You're the same too though, of course. There's no way to pin something on him that's good enough to get him dragged down either".

"It doesn't matter whether he's the leader or not. It also doesn't matter if he can be dragged down or not. There are many ways to crush him".

Nagumo said so and laughed.

"Sorry but I can't trust you. Not to the extent that I'd entrust you with Class B's fate".

"That's unfortunate".

Nagumo spoke all that in front of everyone in the group. Innocent defenselessness. Or perhaps he's deliberately making himself seem defenseless? There's no way it's going to be the former.

2

During dinner, I decided to act. I say 'act' but all I'm doing here is trying to work out the situation on the girls' side. Because the fact that Ichinose and Shiina are in the same group caught my attention. It would be best if I can work out what's going on with the other groups. As for Kei, she's having dinner in the same spot as the previous days to make it easier for me to approach her.

Even though I ordered no such thing. How reliable of her. On the other hand, I had been randomly picking empty seats and didn't tie myself down to one location for meals.

That's because I chose to avoid making open contact with Kei, just in case. There aren't many students who are aware of the relationship between me, Ryuen plus a few other Class D students, vice president Kiriama and Kei.

Besides, there's also an enemy within I need to watch out for. I checked the time and took a seat near Kei. And as I began thinking of a way to make her aware of my presence---

"hnn---".

Kei greeted me with a squeak? I was greeted by something along the lines of that. Looks like Kei noticed me coming over, despite the fact that she had been chatting with her friends. If so, I should just patiently wait until she's rid herself of the nuisance.

Kei continued eating dinner leisurely and manipulated her friends into leaving with the excuse of returning to their room early. I had been considering postponing our conversation if it meant another student might barge in during the middle of it, or if her friends had chosen to stay but it looks like she's succeeded in manipulating them.

Eventually, there's no one left around us who'd pay attention to either of us and so our conversation started.

Of course, if someone came our way this conversation would instantly be cut short though.

"So? Finally feel like relying on me on the third day?"

"That's about right. There's far too little information on the girls".

"Well, it can't be helped right? For someone with a communication disorder like you, there are only a few girls you could possibly make contact with".

She gave me the cold shoulder right off the bat.

Of course, if that's something Kei can take advantage of to maintain our relationship then that's a cheap price to pay but I felt like bullying her. Just a bit.

"Then even without my advice, you can overcome this special exam?"

"O-Of course. Who do you think I am?"

"I see. Then there's nothing to fear".

".....later, at least analyze my situation to see if there's any danger or not,

ok?".

Perhaps she felt anxious at that, since Kei said that to me.

"For now, let's hear it starting from the partitioning of the girls' groups".

"Ahh, before we talk about that there's something that's been bugging me".

"Let's keep it brief".

If the conversation between the two of us takes too long, there may be students who'd grow suspicious.

"It's something pretty important.....or more like, what's going on with that Ryuen guy?".

"Are you concerned?".

"I mean, yeah. It's become a topic even among the girls. Why that guy stopped being the leader but it doesn't look like anybody knows the truth though".

"Being as meek as a lamb, that expression doesn't quite fit Ryuen but right now it looks like he's acting quite mature".

"Does that mean your chastisement worked?".

"Chastisement, eh?".

Behind Kei's tough words lies her vulnerable side, occasionally showing itself. Her curiosity about him probably stems from her anxiety which itself resulted from the fact that Ryuen's seen her at her weakest.

"Don't worry about Ryuen. He won't act carelessly. At the very least, I can say that he won't do anything to Kei from now on".

I said so to reassure her. However, I didn't get a response from Kei.

I had every intention of being cautious, so perhaps it's because someone came? That's what I had assumed but that doesn't seem to be the case. I immediately grasped the situation.

".....sorry, that was nothing".

She tried to deceive me with that.

"That didn't seem like nothing, Kei".

"I-I'm telling you it's nothing".

"Is that true, Kei?".

".....hold it right there. You're doing it on purpose!".

She didn't turn around, but she said so threateningly.

Maybe I bullied her a tad bit too much.

"Ahh, mou. Really, I shouldn't have given you permission to call me by my first name.....".

"You're the one who called me out here in the first place though".

"Yeah. That can't be helped".

More importantly, if we're done talking about Ryuen then I'd like to move onto business. Although we're blending in with the hustle and bustle, if someone familiar with us happens to stumble upon this scene, they'd grow suspicious of the relationship between us.

"For the record, I've gathered as much information as I possibly could.....can I talk about it?".

"Yeah".

"Just so you know, I couldn't get information on every single group like you wanted me to".

"I know. I'm not expecting all that from you".

"That's a really irritating way of saying it. Even someone like you wouldn't know which group everyone belongs to, right?"

"Maybe. I wonder".

".....what, surely you aren't saying you've memorized all of that, are you?"

"I never said that".

"What group does Class B's Shibata-kun belong to?"

"A Class B-focused group led by Kanzaki".

"What about Class A's Tsukasaki-kun?"

"He's also like that. He belongs to a Class A-focused group established by a student named Matoba".

"Th-Then what about Suzuki-kun?"

"The person who goes by that name was assigned to a different small group".

"So you HAVE memorized it all!"

"Just the people whose names I know. But if I can see their faces, I can tell which group which student belongs to".

The one thing I must thank this special exam for is that it made me decide to memorize the names of all 1st year students. By the time this exam's over, I'm sure I'll be able to match each name with a face with near 100% accuracy.

As long as I haven't overlooked anyone or misunderstood anything, that is.

"Haa.....what exactly did you have to do to get such a good memory? Are you perhaps the four-eyed nerd-kun type?"

Unfortunately, I don't quite get what Kei is saying.

"More importantly, let's get down to business. What's going on with Sakayanagi and Kamuro's group?"

"The two of them are in the same group composed of three classes with nine from Class A. Class A's the first to assemble, you see".

I received such an explanation from Kei. Just like the Class A boys, they also went with the same strategy of assembling right off the bat, huh? But they settled for nine rather than twelve, eh?

"A three class composite means that someone's been left out. Or perhaps Sakayanagi did not let them join?".

"They didn't accept anyone from Class B in so they were rejected from the very start. They said something about Ichinose-san not being trustworthy and what not. Of course, the one who said that was Kamuro-san instead of Sakayanagi-san though".

"Not trustworthy, huh?".

"I mean, any student from another class isn't trustworthy by default but Ichinose-san's the only one called out by name that way. But isn't that strange? I've heard how popular she is".

If we have to name just one 1st year student from another class who's trustworthy then without a doubt I would have named Ichinose too. Of course, if it's the other classes doing the naming then there'd be quite a lot of students naming Kushida. Anyway, Ichinose should be either number one or two when it comes to being the most trustworthy student in our school year. However, the reward will be smaller if the group is made up of the minimum number of people from three classes.

A strategy where there's no total victory. But at the same time also a strategy where there's no total defeat.

"Unfair, isn't it? Class A should've just looked after themselves. They were very bullish during group formation".

"I suppose so".

A solid and safe strategy. No doubt about it, Sakayanagi must have been the one who drafted this plan. It's surprising that someone as aggressive as her would choose to adopt a defensive strategy like this.

"So? What should I do next? Should I try something?"

"Tricks won't really fly in this special exam. But there are a few people I'd like you to keep an eye on".

I told her that and named several people who are likely to become the key players.

"Hnn, sounds pretty tough but I'll give it a try".

Obediently following the orders issued to her. That's Kei's strong point.

"But what's up with this exam? Are stuff like manners and morals really that necessary?"

"I wonder. If I have to put this in terms of a story, then it might be something of a MacGuffin".

"Ehh? Maguga-----".

"I'm not talking about a mug cup, you know".

"I-I knew that. So? What's this all about?"

She didn't seem like she had the faintest idea.

"It's an important 'something' for the characters but it's not something vital for the story itself. That's what it means".

"I didn't get any of that. I know Kiyotaka's smart so explain that in layman's terms already".

"What I'm saying is that while things like manners and morals may be necessary, they aren't important in and of themselves".

The time allocated for dinner is almost over and students are beginning to scatter.

"But this exam---might get a little stormy".

"Stormy.....what do you mean? Does that mean if things go the way Kiyotaka predicted, something terrible's going to happen?".

"Relax. At the very least I can say no harm will come to you".

This time around, the storm won't be hitting the 1st years. I grabbed my tray and stood up.

"If I need you again, I'll let you know".

"Roger".

After our little back-and-forth, I decided to returned to the shared room.

3

It's about the time when I entered the third large public bath on the night of the third day.

Inside the large bath, there were a couple of boys huddled around a corner.

Yamauchi and Ike, and not only them but also some students from Class B such as Shibata were there.

I ended up exchanging glances with Kanzaki, who coincidentally entered the bath at the same time I did.

"This seems like an unusual gathering".

Kanzaki too, looks at that group in surprise.

"Seems like it".

"What about your group? Any troubles in particular?".

"I don't know, I don't think I can say it's going swimmingly".

As I answered frankly, Kanzaki appeared to have been convinced of that without a hint of surprise.

"If you only have a few people in it and all four classes aren't evenly represented it tends to be like that".

"I wouldn't mind it if it's just that".

"I heard about it from Moriyama and the others. Seems like you have your hands full with Kouenji".

I suppose something like that would obviously be assumed.

"He is contributing as a classmate but I can't rein him in at all".

"Speaking of reining in.....did you hear about Ryuen?".

"No, I haven't heard anything about him".

It's been three days now since Akito got drafted into Ryuen's group. I do see him during bath time and toilet breaks as well as during meals but we just keep missing each other.

"If he's scheming something there should be a few rumors popping up but I haven't heard any reports at all".

Since Kanzaki, who's the sub-leader of Class B, is saying that then that must be the case.

From my point of view, considering I'm aware of the whole story, there's no way Ryuen would do anything but the suspicion cast on him by his surroundings may have finally subsided.

However, for the time being, they won't be taking their eyes off him.

Because you could predict that there's a high possibility he'll spring some sort

of trap at the end of the actual exam.

"If there's anything troubling you, please feel free to consult me. I'd like to maintain good relations with Class C too. Of course, Ichinose feels that way too".

"That's something to be grateful for".

"Ichinose seems to have a high opinion of Horikita. It's of her honesty rather than her talent though".

"Honesty.....eh?".

If you ask whether or not Horikita has a straightforward personality then to be honest, I can't bring myself to call her an honest one.

However, I think what Kanzaki refers to as 'honesty' and what I consider to be 'honesty' have different meanings altogether.

Making sure to keep your promises, that sort of integrity is probably what he's referring to.

You can't count on Sakayanagi or Ryuen in that regard after all.

"Hey, Kanzaki! Over here, over here!".

Shibata spotted Kanzaki standing around near the entrance and talking to me and so he waved his hand.

"Ayanokouji~you come join us too~".

And around the same time, Yamauchi caught me too and beckoned me over.

Since the mood here won't allow me to decline him, I approached.

"What's the matter?".

Kanzaki asks Shibata.

"No man, the thing is, I'm having fun with Yamauchi and the others over something strange".

"Something strange?".

"We're talking about whose got the biggest one in our school year".

"One? By that you mean?".

"Isn't that obvious? This, this".

Shibata laughed as he pointed at the center of the towel covering his groin.

".....I see, you're having fun".

Saying that, Kanzaki exasperatedly sighed at the childish competition Shibata's engaged in.

"No, I think it's childish too you know? But you see, this is unexpectedly fun".

Both Kanzaki and I failed to see what exactly is so fun about it. We exchanged glances and decided to keep our distance considering the timing.

When Shibata and the others continued their discourse, Kanzaki left.

After a slight delay, I too, made a move to leave. However---

"Who's the alpha for now?".

Perhaps he's overheard their conversation, as Sudou showed up with a calm and composed attitude.

He grabbed ahold of my shoulders and as such, I could no longer escape.

"...I have no idea".

I dodged the question.

While the majority of students had towels covering their groins, he boldly showed himself off.

"Ohh.....as expected of Sudou".

I could see Shibata hold his breath.

"The current alpha is Class D's Kaneda".

"Kaneda? That four eyes?".

Move over, as though saying that to Shibata, Sudou brushes him aside and joins up with Yamauchi and the others.

Kaneda doesn't appear to have any intention of joining in the competition and seemed uncomfortable.

"So you came, Ken! You're the only reliable one here!".

"Leave it to me".

Sudou participates as Class C's representative. Sudou confronts Kaneda, who's left bewildered from having been dragged into this fight.

"So you wear your glasses even inside the bath huh?".

"If I don't, I can't see well enough to walk.....".

"That so?".

Of course it's not like this is an act of violence at all. It's just them standing next to each other.

Victory and defeat are almost always decided in an instant.

"Alright!".

Sudou boisterously makes a guts pose in the bath. His voice echoed throughout it. At last this game is over, is the expression Kaneda had as he fled.

I can only say that it's truly nothing short of misfortune that he got dragged into it.

"Then that means I'm the alpha".

There probably aren't that many students who would challenge Sudou after

knowing of his strength.

This meaningless competition ends with this, is what I thought but.....

"Alpha? Don't make me laugh, Sudou".

Yahiko came over to the boisterously laughing Sudou.

However, Sudou only took one glance at Yahiko's naked body before ignoring him. Since Yahiko did not cover up his front, the contest ended without a fight.

"You're no match for me".

"That may be so.....but I'm not your opponent here".

"It doesn't matter who my opponent is. The alpha is Class D's---".

"No, Ken. We're Class C, Class C".

"...that's right. Class C's Sudou Ken-sama is the alpha here!".

"You're just a cut above the bottom. Don't think you can beat Class A's Katsuragi-san!".

Apparently it's not Yahiko he'll be fighting but rather, the man Yahiko admires so much: Katsuragi.

Said Katsuragi said on a chair and was in the process of reaching for the shampoo to wash his head with.

I was curious about which part exactly he's going to apply the shampoo to but this isn't the place to ask that.

"Stop it, Yahiko. I have no interest in this pointless contest".

"I can't allow that. This is about a man's pride, no, we have to win since it's Class A's dignity on the line here!".

"This is a pointless contest...".

"That's not really true, is it Katsuragi?".

Hashimoto approaches. Yahiko gave a blatant display of disgust towards him.

"Like Yahiko said, Class A's pride is on the line. That thing of yours is pretty much the only thing that can go against Sudou's, isn't that right?".

Hashimoto personally checked out what he referred to as Katsuragi's thing.

And he probably estimated that it had a chance of winning as he boldly laughed and embraced the possibility of a victory.

On the other hand, Katsuragi made no move to stand up.

"Bring it on, Katsuragi".

Katsuragi remained calm in response to Sudou's provocations. However, everyone else got pumped up at that.

They egged Katsuragi on to go against Sudou.

"Honestly. The way things are now I won't be able to wash my head in peace".

That means he really had been intending on applying the shampoo to his head.

"The contest will only last a moment, Katsuragi".

"...have it your way".

Having judged that the optimal solution would be to accept the challenge, he slowly got up.

Everyone gave a sigh of admiration for that large frame of his. And so the two mighty rivals confronted each other.

"T-This is-----!?".

Yamauchi, who went over to act as the judge, crouched down.

He checked both their assets left and right but it appears the difference between the two is an imperceptible one.

While waiting for the judgement to be delivered, Sudou gave his praise.

"Not bad, Katsuragi. You've convinced me that there's a reason why you're Class A's trump card".

"This is stupid.....".

"The judgement is---".

Yamauchi stood up.

"A draw!".

In a contest where a tie is an unlikely outcome, the judge ruled it as exactly that.

Ike, Shibata and the others crowded around the judge to object. However, it would appear that Yamauchi's judgement is an accurate one as they were also unable to decide whose is bigger.

"...is this good enough?".

Fed up with being put on display, Katsuragi forcibly returned to his original position.

"I don't want to acknowledge this but we'll both share 1st place for now then".

I doubt anyone would object to that but things won't wrap up with this.

"I saw your duel go down. How naive".

The one who said that was Class D's Ishizaki.

"Hah. Don't make me laugh, Ishizaki. You're no match for me".

Sudou laughs as though saying it's not even a contest.

Ishizaki is pretty much on the same level as Yahiko.

"I'm not your opponent".

"What?".

"You fool! We of Class D possess the ultimate trump card!".

".....it can't be, Ryuen?".

"No!".

Ishizaki boisterously shouts the name of that man.

"Albert, it's your turn!".

The moment he called out that name, the boys around him all went into uproar.

Despite everyone having thought of him at least once, they had all left Albert out of the equation. Now that unspoken rule has been broken.

"Hey, that's cheating!".

Even Sudou, who acted like an alpha, failed to conceal his discomposure.

"Come on. If it's a competition to determine who's number one in our school year then even Albert's a friend!".

Well, considering the flow of the conversation thus far, Ishizaki's assertion certainly isn't wrong.

However, no one can deny the fact that a competition that goes beyond countries would put us at a disadvantage.

Japan's professional baseball players are quite high-level but if you take a look at the major leagues, the difference between the two in regards to physical ability couldn't be more obvious.

They'd probably be stunned by the bodies of the foreigners who possess different physiques and even different genes.

Albert silently shows up.

Sudou and Katsuragi are also blessed with a good physique but they're no match.

Furthermore, despite being in a bath, he's still wearing his sunglasses.

Normally they'd cloud up and you'd be unable to see anything but perhaps he's applied an anti-fogging gel to it, since Albert moves without a hint of hesitation.

"Kuu, he's huge.....".

Albert had a bath towel wrapped around his waist.

Apparently Sudou's mutters were about his physique. I understand it now that there's a direct contrast.

The difference between them is like the difference between a middle school student and a college student.

And as such, the difference between their 'weapons' should also be the same.

Or perhaps even if it's only by a little, all Sudou could do was to pray that the weapon isn't a big one.

"Bring it on!".

Showing no fear, Sudou steps forward.

As an alpha, he cannot afford to flee.

Albert simply remained silent. And then intimidatingly enough, he had Ishizaki take care of disrobing him.

The veil that had been parted. Everyone, not just the alpha Sudou, looked on.

Now then, will a weapon worthy of a last boss show itself? Or perhaps it'll be a completely unexpected outcome where it's a surprisingly small one?

Right now, a clash of the sexes has begun.

"Go---Albert!".

Ishizaki probably doesn't know either. Albert's power is finally unveiled at last.

"T-This is---!?".

First appearing before the eyes of the alpha, the true, hidden form of Albert.

And silence fell upon us.

"I---lost".

A single sentence from the alpha, Sudou.

He collapsed onto his knees and felt an overwhelming sense of loss.

Unlike the contest he had with Katsuragi, there was no need for a judge this time.

The difference between them was just that large.

"Is this Albert's.....the last boss's power?".

Yamauchi, Shibata and the others also lost all their will to fight and they collapsed just like Sudou did.

There's no longer a challenger capable of winning.

The currents of despair started to blow in.

Albert slowly bent his large frame and picked up the towel and then walked off just like that.

And just like how Sudou did, the other boys also fell to their knees.

Having acknowledged their loss, just as everyone was on the verge of giving up.

"Ha. Ha. Ha. It appears you lot are just like Children amusing themselves".

In an instant, cutting through the melancholy, was Kouenji's voice.

It seems he's been observing the fight from inside the bathtub.

"What the hell, Kouenji? Aren't you frustrated too!? Look at this pathetic state Sudou's in now!".

Yamauchi screamed. Because of his anguish, Sudou was still incapable of standing back up.

"I know. But Red Hair-kun fought well in his own way".

"The hell, you bastard. Are you trying to say you can go against Albert?".

It was a question from Sudou, who now had lifeless eyes.

But Kouenji's usual attitude did not change.

"I am, at all times, a perfect existence. Even as a man, I possess the ultimate body".

"Don't dodge the question. Tell me in detail".

Kouenji swiped his hair back without even getting out of the bathtub.

"There's no need for a fight. It's precisely because I know there's nobody better than me that there's no need to shed blood over such pointless matters".

"You say that, but couldn't it not be the case?".

Yamauchi tried poking him.

However, Kouenji's attitude did not undergo even a single change.

"You are truly a fool. However, I suppose it is fun playing along with you lot occasionally".

It appears he intends to accept the challenge as Kouenji once again swiped his hair back.

"Now then, shall I assume Albert-kun to be my opponent in this competition?".

Why did he hold his rod?

"No, it's Katsuragi-san!".

Yahiko shouts out.

"No, I have nothing to do with this Yahiko.....".

"There's no way Kouenji can win if he goes against Albert! As the representative of the Japanese people I beg you Katsuragi-san, please defeat him!".

After all, Yahiko and Kouenji are in the same group as well so he must have his own thoughts about the man.

Even though he had been in the bath too, there's no way Kouenji should know about Sudou and the others' assets in detail.

If it's Katsuragi, who equalled Sudou, there's still a good chance that he'd win.

".....honestly.....just this once ok?".

Exasperatedly, the representative of the Japanese people stood up. His thing swayed from left to right.

At that moment, the boys began looking at it as though it were something divine.

"A-As I thought, he's huge. He can't go against Albert but if it's Kouenji then---".

"Fufufu. I see. So you didn't end up as the alpha once for nothing, is what it means then".

"Please wrap it up quickly".

"However, you are no match for me".

After looking at that, Kouenji did not even try to get up from the bathtub.

"Oi, oi. You aren't scared, are you Kouenji? Are you just for show, now hiding in that bathtub?".

Ishizaki also tried egging him on.

"I'm not so foolish as to point my blade at someone who's no match for me".

"Heh. Then we'll break your spirit until there's nothing left to show of it. Right, Albert!?".

The foreign representative, the man known as Albert, also moved to stand next to Katsuragi.

And when he did, a phenomenon occurred where even Katsuragi's seemed small in comparison.

Seeing that, for the first time, a dramatic change in Kouenji's expression occurred.

"Bravo".

Pan! He claps his hands.

"I see, I see. As expected of the world's representative, it looks like you aren't all talk after all".

"Do you get it know, Kouenji? How much of a clown you've been, I mean".

"Enough is enough for me".

Having finished washing his body, Katsuragi entered a bathtub as though keeping his distance from Kouenji.

Nobody's interested in Katsuragi anymore since they were all engrossed in the Kouenji vs. Albert fight.

"Normally my policy is to not show it to men. But this is a one-time service".

Kouenji then took the towel beside him in hand, wrapped it around his waist as though to hide his weapon and stood up.

And then he slowly got out of the bathtub.

"Y-You're finally up to the challenge, Kouenji?".

The confrontation took place between the ultimate eccentric and the alpha.

"The outcome is something I can tell from the start though. I'll have everyone here be living witnesses".

Kouenji made a pose while removing the towel veiling him.

In that instant, a dazzling light filled my eyes.

A sword covered by the blonde mane of a lion.

No, it's too big to be called a sword.

I could hear Albert whisper softly beside me.

『Oh my God』

"And with this I have proved once and for all that my existence is a perfect one".

The boys who were used as living witnesses could not even make a sound.

"Are you really even human?".

Before the overwhelming power that goes beyond nationality, all Sudou could do was offer up those words.

If Sudou and Katsuragi are rifles and Albert is a bazooka. Then Kouenji would be a tank.

Nobody could go against that overwhelming firepower.

Its colossal size, armor and firepower would knock anyone over.

It's very likely that no one capable of stopping Kouenji would be showing up now.

As for why, that's because in this large bath there's not another student capable of beating Albert.

It was when everyone was on the verge of admitting that.

"Kuku. Hold it right there, Kouenji".

A voice called out. It came from the bathtub that Kouenji had been in until a while ago.

"R-Ryuen.....".

Someone recognized him.

He's the man who was keeping himself warm in the jetted tub near Kouenji. The former leader of Class D, Ryuen Kakeru.

The man who must have been observing Albert and Kouenji's fight had lively eyes.

"Surely you aren't saying you're a match for me?"

"No. Not even I can beat that thing of yours. However, there may be someone here who could put up a good fight you know?"

He made a statement that hinted at something and all at once, the students looked around.

However, there's no way such a person could possibly exist.

And then I realized.

The fact that right now, Ryuen has caught me in his trap.

"Really? Who might that be?"

Perhaps that also roused Kouenji's interest somewhat, as he asks that of Ryuen.

"No idea. But if I'm not mistaken then there's still one more person here who's covering himself up with a towel and hiding his true strength".

Leaving behind that bomb I really wish he hadn't planted, Ryuen entered the bath and turned his back.

Fortunately enough, there were only a few people listening to what Ryuen had to say, but their gazes intensified.

In all likelihood I felt like it's not just the men in the bath but people from all around Japan who happen to be paying attention.

"No way, a guy like you? Come on, no way".

Saying that, Yahiko approached and glared at me.

".....are you really taking his words at face value?".

"I have no intention of doing that.....it's just, I'm curious about how you alone kept hiding yourself".

"Curious or not, I had no intention of joining in from the start".

I declined to join in while taking a step back.

"That may be so but please let me check, just in case".

Yamauchi and Yahiko approached me as though flanking me.

At that very moment, I saw Ryuen laughing boldly.

"I will make you taste defeat".

Was what his gaze and smile conveyed.

As I had feared.....

Ryuen, who had no way of knowing what mine looked like, deliberately instigated this.

Having me deal with Kouenji, he seems intent on making me 'lose' one way or another.

A very Ryuen-like, malicious way of fighting.

I could go all out and escape the bath but that would be the equivalent of rejecting bath time at the outdoor school. Sooner or later, this veil would be parted.

If there's still a way left to save myself it would be to take down every single student approaching me.

But that can no longer be considered a viable strategy.

Either way, I've suffered something similar to a defeat.

In other words, there aren't any means left for me to avoid this

incomprehensible situation with anymore.

After seeing how I didn't budge, Kouenji laughed.

"Ha. Ha. Ha. There's nothing to be ashamed of Ayanokouji Boy. Even if you happen to be wearing a protector, it's something a lot of Japanese boys do. It's a precious something to protect you".

"You don't have much protection yourself, Kouenji".

"Because I already possess overwhelming strength, you see. I have no need of armor".

No, there should still be a way for me to escape.

Think, I have to find it, a means of escape-----

"You guys do the chant, the chant".

Despite having dropped out already, Ryuen eggs the students on from inside the bath.

He's set a trap, crushing my strategy and making sure that I can no longer escape.

"Take it off! Take it off! Take it off!".

It began to rise all around me, the chant the boys let loose all at once.

It didn't matter to the boys who instigated it. I was completely boxed in by Ryuen and all the other boys.

I came here to replenish myself after a tiring day.

".....I get it".

I cannot deny the fact that sometimes you've just got to fight.

I have no choice but to admit that now is one of those times.

As a man with a weapon, if I must fight, then I should fight.

The important thing here isn't winning or losing nor is it pride.

"Have it your way".

"Do you want me to assist in your suicide, Ayanokouji?".

Sudou approached me.

I stopped them with my hands.

I was buffeted by those relentless chants and so I removed the towel around my waist myself-----

The ongoing chant slowly faded away.

And almost as though the noise from earlier never existed, a silence fell upon us.

"Y-You've got to be kidding me, that Ayanokouji guy.....".

"I don't believe it.....".

As though they were whispering, someone somewhere talked about me.

"Well, well, I'm honestly impressed Ayanokouji Boy. To think that there's a Japanese person capable of fighting evenly against me. If you ask me, a few millimeters difference may as well be nonexistent".

".....it's almost like two T-Rexes having a showdown.....".

The boys stared at us in admiration from inside the bath.

"It's almost like you lot have become living witnesses to the making of history".

Kouenji tossed the towel onto his shoulder, laughing as he faced everyone.

"However strictly speaking, I win. If you're using a T-Rex as an example then the difference lies in the number of prey we've eaten. In other words, the difference between us lies in our experience".

There's no longer even a need to tell us the details, Kouenji then plopped himself back into the bath.

4

In the middle of the night, I lay on the bed of our shared room. It's 1 o'clock in the morning, already way past lights out. Obviously that means everyone's sound asleep. There's a reason why I'm awake at a time like this when I should be sleeping in preparation for what's coming tomorrow. That reason lies in the small piece of paper placed under my pillow. The number '25' is written on it.

It's precisely because it's so simple that it doesn't leave much to the imagination. It's a memo signalling that the time is now 25:00. I haven't the faintest clue who left it here but the reason I'm awake now is to find out.

If this is just a prank or something that carries an entirely different meaning, then that'll be the end of that. Then I'll be able to use this time to relax and think about where the true essence of this special exam lies.

I'm slowly beginning to see the bigger picture behind the contents of this special exam. Of course, since we didn't exactly get a detailed explanation on how the scoring works this is going to involve some guesswork but there are several things that this special exam almost certainly entails.

'Zen'.

From the way they were acting prior to Zazen, it appears even things like our postures during Zazen are being scored. Things like inappropriate behavior or being hit with a Zen stick are all likely causes for a demerit.

'Long-distance relay race'.

This one's probably going to have a simple evaluation system based on order and time.

'Speech'.

Each person in each large group must give a speech individually. The scoring criteria has already been disclosed.

It's the following four: 'Volume', 'Posture', 'Subject' and 'Communicativeness'.

'Written exam'.

I expect this to be an exam focusing mainly on the subject of morals. Just like your average run-of-the-mill exam, this one should also be determined by how good or how bad your marks are.

There are also other things to consider such as 'cleaning' and 'cooking meals' but I can't draw conclusions on them just yet. Problems that arise within a tardy group are beyond the jurisdiction of the exam but depending on the context, they may also be part of what's being assessed.

Perhaps a lot of students are fretting over how to overcome this multi-front exam. A necessary strategy one can only see after understanding the true essence of it.

To properly unite the group, cover for one another and secure a high average score. In other words, the simple approach. It looks easy yet with considerably difficult obstacles in its way. That much can be gleaned from seeing the formation of the groups. It's exceedingly difficult to completely cooperate with

students who you would normally have an antagonistic relationship with.

It would be a strategy that Horikita and Hirata from our class, or Ichinose and Katsuragi from the other classes would have chosen. Being influential in one's group and possessing leadership skills makes all the difference.

Picking members for your group is, of course, important. But at this stage, it's almost impossible to determine which students are capable of performing well in an exam like this.

Keisei, who excels academically, struggled with five minutes and two sets of Zazen on the very first day and there were students who were unable to even cross their legs.

At this stage, you can't use academic or athletic excellence to measure anything and going forward it's going to be students with the most adaptability who stand out.

And there are definitely more than a few students who opted to go with other strategies. I could also tell from the moment they explained the rules of this exam that even the school had a hard time preparing this unorthodox exam.

This has been the case since our first special exam on that uninhabited island but in each case there's always been an exploitable loophole in the rules.

Because there's always a blind spot, like when Horikita and Ibuki fought on the uninhabited island despite any sort of violence being prohibited. Of course, if the foul play is exposed then the consequences are also extreme. Since immediate expulsion is on the table, the majority of students won't actually make their move. In the first place, it's not like committing foul play is a surefire way to win. To take your shot with the few loopholes and blind spots you have or not. You would need to overcome that difficult obstacle.

I've executed various strategies in all the special exams so far. On the uninhabited island, I had Horikita retire and switched leaders. On the cruise, I

pulled off the cell phone trick. I made a bold move during the sports festival and during Paper Shuffle, I shut Kushida down.

But this time around, I decided early on to not do anything. I would gather information and only play the role of the observer. That is because I've deemed this a necessary move to make if I am to fade out and graduate as an ordinary student.

Even if it means Class C will suffer a massive loss now, I still won't do anything. Partly because I want to show Sakayanagi and Nagumo, who have both taken a certain amount of interest in me, that I have no intention of fighting. I'm skeptical about the effectiveness of such a move though.

That way, since I am carefully observing, the older Horikita would have no grounds to blame me on either.

However, if there's a measure I can take, that would be defense. If there's a student who's out to expel me, then it's only natural that I react in self-defense. It's already past 25:00. Looks like nothing out of the ordinary's happened. If so, I should sleep. But just as I thought that, the door that connects this room to the corridor outside slightly cracked open and a bit of light streamed in.

It's Morse code. Utilizing blinking lights as a form of communication. In the middle of the night at the training camp, the corridor itself was very dark and so several flashlights had been placed in our room.

In all likelihood, that means I'll have to bring one along with me.

I understood that this is a signal calling me out. Light makes no sound. I silently stood up. Our room doesn't have a toilet. The act of going to the toilet in the middle of the night in itself is not a suspicious one.

I left the room. The corridor is covered in darkness but I could hear faint footsteps. I followed. The person holding the light turned out to be Horikita Manabu.

"To think you'd be the one to initiate contact. Isn't it a bit conspicuous?"

In order to place a memo on my bed like that, he'd have to know where I sleep. In that case, there's only one person that comes to mind. It's either Ishikura or Tsunoda, the 3rd years Nagumo brought with him to play cards with us on the very first day.

If he asks either one of them, he'd know which bed I'm using.

"There's no shortage of students meeting secretly at night like this. Because at least two or three strategies are being implemented for this special exam after all".

1st years, 2nd years and 3rd years are all using what knowledge they possess for the sake of winning. But even so, there's no way people who'd meet the way we're meeting now would be up to any good.

"Do you know why I called you out at this time?"

"Because Nagumo's up to something. That's the only reason I can think of".

"It's exactly that. I called you out here because I thought you might know something about that since you're in the same large group he is. Besides, I wanted to answer that mail you sent me on the bus".

"Let me say this beforehand. You're off the mark. There are no signs of Nagumo being up to anything".

There's a number of things to worry about in that regard but I lied and told him I have yet to grasp anything. Nagumo had challenged the older Horikita. As long as that challenge took place in front of a great number of people, losing this easily would set a bad example for the 2nd years and in the future, he'll be doubted by both his seniors and juniors. If you're going to fight, you should do it

only after making absolutely sure of your victory. But I can't sense that here. Since the older Horikita had instructed him to fight fair-and-square, I had expected him to put in effort during our lessons and manage us strictly but there's no sign of that happening either.

That must have worried Horikita Manabu. If that's not the case, he wouldn't have taken the risk of calling me out here.

"Then you're saying Nagumo is going to take the actual exam without having tried anything?"

"I don't know. I don't think it's possible to accomplish much without dragging a third party in though".

Even if one doesn't talk or doze off during class, even if they're never late and even if they make sure to stay healthy it's not like that would make their test scores go up dramatically.

At best, they would only act to ensure one doesn't get any demerits.

"Currently, I've assessed that our large group is the more united one".

The older Horikita calmly made his analysis. Certainly, he's got the Class A-focused group from the 1st years as well. If they take the exam in this state, their chances of winning are extremely high.

That is precisely why he's worried about Nagumo, who has yet to make a move.

"What are the chances of him breaking his promise? No matter what form it takes, he may want to leave a mark on you".

"Nagumo certainly doesn't show any mercy to those who go against him. And he's also used underhanded methods in a manner similar to Ryuen more than a few times. And that's the cause of the 2nd years' abnormally high dropout rate. However, he has never once broken a promise he's given. Not even once".

"So you're saying he's going to keep his word about not involving a third party in this?".

"That's right".

As far as that's concerned, the older Horikita nodded without any hesitation at all. It's probably one of those things he knows precisely because they've been in the student council together for two years now. After having heard those words of absolute certainty, I felt doubt at first. But then I arrived at the answer to that. That's something that applies to the older Horikita before me right now and probably all the 2nd and 3rd year students as well. I may be able to offer the older Horikita another piece of advice here.

However, it might not make that much sense. Because he's already determined that he'll only be able to ward off attacks by taking the words of his enemy at face value.

"Looks like this has been a waste of time".

Turning his back on me, the older Horikita began walking back to his room.

"It's about that thing you've been wanting to know but.....the student council can exert an influence on the special exams. Things like modifying the rules and penalties. Because they're supposed to represent the students' point of view and their opinions. But it's not like they can do whatever they want".

"I see".

After answering my question, the older Horikita left.

"He might lose".

Before I realized it, I ended up muttering that. No, I suppose 'lose' isn't the best way to put it. The older Horikita won't make any mistakes. He'll properly manage his group and overcome this. He won't slip up.

It's just.....even so, it's clear that this alone isn't all there is to it.

Starting with this exam that kicked off the 3rd semester, a major change might be at hand.

Chapter 4: First half of the girls' battle -

Ichinose Honami

And so, just like that, on the 3rd day, a lot of things seemed to have happened on the boys' side but as a girl myself I, Ichinose Honami, had no way of knowing about those circumstances.

Let me go back to the day the special exam at the outdoor school began and start from there.

"For now, we've already decided on how to partition the groups so let's get along, everyone".

Prior to bedtime, I said that to my group members.

Again and again through ups and downs, as stormy and dramatic events repeated themselves, at least for now my companions with who I'll be challenging this exam have been decided.

Me, Wang Mei-Yu-san, Shiina Hiyori-san, Yabu Nanami-san, Yamashita Saki-san, Kinoshita Minori-san, Nishino Takeko-san, Manabe Shiho-san, Nishi Haruka-san, Motodoi Chikako-san and Rokkaku Momoe-san together form one group.

I'm the only one from Class B, and there's also only one from Class C, the rest are students from either Class A or Class D.

The girls named Manabe-san and Nishino-san seemed to be problem children even within their class. In short, this is a gathering of rejects.

Because when it comes to things like this, girls can be pretty blunt.

Mei-Yu-san and I are just students brought in to fill the leftover spots in the

group and so we don't have much of a connection between one another.

I need to hurry up and forge a relationship.

"Let's get along, Ichinose-san".

"Likewise, Shiina-san. I've always wanted to get along with you".

"Is that so? It's an honor".

But as for Class C.....no, as for Class D, most of their students don't really lend themselves to an exchange like this.

Since Ryuen-kun's behind them, getting along with them really did prove to be impossible after all.

Well, it still isn't very clear whether or not he's truly stepped down though.

Either way, we've finally made a girls' group, so I'd like to get along.

The one thing I need to avoid above all else is this group not making the cut and an expulsion occurring. In other words, someone having to take responsibility and dragging someone else down along with them.

Even if my top priority happened to be my comrades from Class B, now that we've formed this group I can't play favorites here.

I told myself that.

Wang Mei-Yu-san did not actively participate. Or to be more precise, it felt like she was unable to do so even if she did want to participate.

Of course, it's easy for me to simply reach out to her.

But this group is made up chiefly of girls from Class A and Class D.

Furthermore, there are quite a bit of girls with comparatively big egos.

If I carelessly start pulling them along willy-nilly, they may start to suspect me.

That's why I decided to wait for a while.

And if those two classes still don't take the initiative and reach out to Wang Mei-Yu-san with a helping hand, then I'll do something about it.

"You're.....Wang Mei-Yu-san right?".

"Y-Yes".

Shiina-san approached her from the side and gently called out to her.

She's an extremely reliable person who took the initiative and accepted the role of leader for even a group like this.

This time around, I did not put myself forward for the role of leader.

It's partly because Shiina-san immediately raised her hand but it's also because I didn't think we could get 1st place considering our members.

"This is very nervewracking, is it not? To be surrounded by unfamiliar people".

"Umm, ummmm, that's not really.....".

"It's understandable that you would be bewildered if you're suddenly told to get along or break down walls".

"Yeah, yeah. It's exactly as Shiina-san says".

The walls that exist between strangers and friends aren't something you can overcome just by wanting to.

They're something that's already overcome by the time you notice.

If you just keep overthinking it then you'll lose sight of your bearings and fall.

"Hey, Ichinose-san. Have you ever had a boyfriend before?".

A girl from Class A slammed that question into me.

"No.....embarrassingly enough I don't have any experience when it comes to romance".

"I see. Even though you look like you'd be super popular, could it be that you're the high standards type?".

"I don't believe I am.....but I wonder".

"Alright then, are there any boys you're interested in right now?".

"Eeeeeeeehhhhhhh~".

Suddenly being asked something like that, I couldn't help but panic.

"You know, there are rumors that you've been seen alone together with Nagumo-senpai, quite often too.....".

Certainly, ever since I joined the student council, I've been taking action alongside President Nagumo quite a lot.

I surely didn't expect it to be at the extent where rumors like this would pop up.

"Before getting into whether I like him or hate him, I don't really think of the student council president that way I'm telling you".

"No way that's true, right?".

"Yeah, yeah. If it's Ichinose-san, it wouldn't be strange even if you started dating Nagumo-senpai".

"Either way, there isn't anyone I like right now, I think.....".

"By 'now' do you mean you used to like someone?".

The girls all went into uproar at the same time.

This is a dangerous topic if you don't have the words for it.

"That's not the case---. Umm, certainly there was a senpai I used to admire but before I could come around to seeing him as a member of the opposite sex, he ended up graduating.....".

I desperately denied it, but the girls looked at each other before breaking out in laughter.

"What? What? Did I say something strange?".

"No. It's just, how should I put it, it's like you're answering everything so seriously".

"Ichinose-san, you're way too honest. You can just brush off whatever you don't want to answer ok?".

"Ahh, does this mean you dodged that question a while ago, Chikako-chan?".

"Ugh".

And with that, the nighttime girls-only gathering became lively once again.

How should I put it, it's a mood that could keep you going on and on without a wink of sleep.

"Even I won't answer what I can't answer, ok?".

"Alright then, how many times have you been confessed to so far?".

"Ehh? Umm 3 times.....ahh, if I include elementary school then that'd be 4 times I guess. And if you include that case, it'd be 5 times".

"See? You're answering!".

"Nyaa---!".

I'm not very good at talking about romance.

It's because I'm unfamiliar with it that I'd slip up.

"Could it be Ichinose-san's the type of person to not tell lies?".

"That may be so---".

Even with that, the girls went into an uproar. But it's probably better if I denied that one.

"That's not true. Really".

"Ehh---?".

"For instance, when it comes to the special exam, wouldn't you need to make a gamble once or twice? I may try to use misdirection or lie at a time like that".

"Then you're fine with telling lies".

".....hmm. That's also not quite right, I guess. I think everybody's the same, nobody really wants to tell lies. That's why, as much as possible, I try to avoid telling lies, would be most accurate I suppose. No, I suppose that's not right either. I'm bad at telling lies with the intent of hurting people, I guess.....".

"Isn't that strange? Wouldn't you normally tell lies to avoid hurting people?".

"That's right. I think lies told to avoid hurting people are definitely gentle ones".

But.....that's not the case when it comes to me. That's right.

This is an ordeal I've set for me and me alone.

"A lie meant to avoid hurting people would only be delaying the inevitable, is how I should put it I suppose.....".

From that one lie, bad things will crop up more and more is what I believe.

I don't want to go through that again. Those painful days. That cruel time.

Chapter 5: Ubiquitous Things

Sunday passed by in the blink of an eye and it's finally Monday, the fifth day of the exam. All four hours of the morning's lessons are dedicated to physical exercise. We're to walk and run 18 kilometers in total around the course that's going to be used for the long-distance relay race and be done with it in time for the afternoon lessons. The actual long-distance relay exam isn't that long, since each student would only be running a distance of about one or two kilometers but it's a winding mountain road. We continued walking for about five kilometers, exhausting ourselves. Up until the other day, we had only worked up a slight sweat here but the difference is astounding.

"How much further does this slope go? Isn't it ridiculous? It's too damn hard".

Past a sign that warned us of wild boars, Ishizaki continued to spit these words.

"Speaking of wild boars, are they big? Like this guy here".

Saying that, he turned his eyes displeasingly towards me.

"That was amazing. I misjudged you, Ayanokouji".

Hashimoto, followed by a bunch of other people, complimented me. But if you ask me, this is just uncomfortable.

I felt troubled, thinking this topic would be used to toy with me for a while. Albert even went as far as to clap his hands lightly in applause. But soon enough, teasing time ended. The winding road to the summit, although paved to allow cars access, is on an extreme incline. It's to the point where just walking up it would put on a strain on our legs.

Furthermore, since we're getting up early to cook breakfast too, we're wasting more of our stamina compared to the seniors. The break we got on Sunday is probably the school being considerate.

"How long is it going to take to go back.....?".

"The average walking speed of a person is about four kilometers. The total distance is eighteen kilometers so if we're just going to walk the entire time then it'll take about four and a half hours".

"You've got to be kidding me. If so, we won't even have time to eat our lunch".

"Then that just means we've got to run, Ishizaki. The more we run, the less time it'll take".

Moriyama from Class B said so sharply. As a matter of fact, we started out as part of our large group but most of the 2nd years and 3rd years went ahead at a faster pace.

"Don't be ridiculous. Like I can run 18 kilometers".

"Don't tire yourselves out talking.....you're all here because you agreed with my strategy right.....?".

While panting heavily, Keisei warns Ishizaki and the others. Students who don't have a problem with their stamina and long distance running could have started running from the very start but running 18 kilometers certainly isn't the best of ideas.

Keisei's strategy is that we walk the first nine kilometers then reach the turnaround point and start running. The fact that we'd be going downhill if we turned back is also something he factored in when he proposed that.

"We haven't even started running yet. As if we'll be able to hold out until the turnaround point".

"Shut it.....just pipe down and walk".

Keisei, who's never been good at physical exercise, seems to have already sustained damage in his legs since he's clearly losing his composure. It's not like

it's impossible for us to traverse the remaining 13 kilometers within the time limit set for us. It's the natural course of action to keep the talking to a minimum and focus on walking.

Still, thanks to this lesson I feel like I'm starting to see who the runners are. There's no doubt that Yahiko and Keisei, both currently suffering, are unsuited for it though.

I feel like Kouenji, who's walking behind us, would be reliable but I heavily doubt he'll run seriously.

"Pipe down and walk? You sound pretty haughty for someone who's out of breath, Yukimura".

Ishizaki looks like he's going to keep going. It doesn't seem like we'll be able to cut down on the talking anytime soon.

"As the leader, I'm saying this with the group in mind.....please don't talk".

"As the leader'? Don't fuck around".

Perhaps the reason Ishizaki is verbally attacking Keisei without end right now is because he's under an excessive amount of stress.

The students who could no longer let that pass, Moriyama and Tokitou, made their displeasure known to Ishizaki.

"Cut it out already, Ishizaki. Yukimura's right this time".

Feeling the sign behind us growing distant, I looked back. And when I did, I realized Kouenji who left the road and wandered into the forest. The other students don't seem to have noticed, only looking forward and walking ahead.

Ishizaki isn't the only problem child we have. This surely isn't a mere detour. I could no longer see him and there's no sign of him coming back anytime soon.

"No helping it.....".

I thought about quietly chasing after Kouenji but they'll end up thinking I left

the road too.

"Kouenji went into that narrow path back there. I'll go and bring him back".

"Ahh? What the hell is that oddball doing!?".

Since there aren't that many students capable of stopping Ishizaki, he seems to be getting louder and louder.

"Don't be distracted too much by that, Ishizaki. It'll be your loss unless you treat Kouenji as something that's just not there".

Keisei's strategy is to treat Kouenji as an invisible presence. Even so, it'll be difficult to completely ignore him. While problems arose here and there, Keisei apologetically said this.

".....sorry, Kiyotaka. I'll leave this to you".

I could tell Keisei no longer has the energy to turn back and go looking for Kouenji. I replied to him immediately.

"If it's Kouenji, won't he be a problem for you? Do you want me to help?".

Hashimoto offered. But I politely turned it down.

"We may be unable to bring him back, no matter how many of us are there. In that case, keeping as many people as possible on the course would give the school a good impression. Doesn't seem like he's just lost either".

"I see. Maybe so. It's best if you come back the moment you feel you won't be able to bring him back with you".

I nodded at Hashimoto's advice and decided to follow Kouenji.

I hadn't planned on actively making a move here but there's also the fact that it's not exactly easy to get an opportunity to be alone with Kouenji. If I'm going to have a chat with him then this is about the only place I can do so.

The narrow path, far from being paved, is nothing more than a dirt road. Despite the terrible terrain, I picked up my pace. If Kouenji's also on foot then I reckon I can catch up to him in about 1 or 2 minutes.

However, it looks like he's also picked up his pace since there's no sign of him.

"How troublesome.....".

Him picking up his pace on its own is one thing but it's just troublesome if he does it on a trackless path like this one.

While searching for any traces Kouenji might have left behind, I picked up my pace even further. And after another 100 meters, I spotted Kouenji's back. Looking at his back, I remembered how a similar situation unfolded back on the uninhabited island.

Of course, Airi had been with me back then and Kouenji ended up shaking us off his tail.

"Kouenji".

I called his name and closed the distance between us as though rushing him.

"Well, if it isn't Ayanokouji Boy. I don't believe this is the proper route".

"There's still the matter of joint responsibility, after all. Why did you decide to take a detour like this?"

"I caught a glimpse of a wild boar. That caught my interest and so I chased it".

That's quite the unexpected reason. I chose to refrain from asking him what he intended to do with it if he found it.

"You may relax. In time, I shall return. If it's me, it won't even take 30 minutes".

Looks like I'm just going to have to take his word for it.

"By the way, do you still have some business with me?".

Kouenji said.

Perhaps he's noticed that I still haven't said my piece since I haven't left yet.

"It's about the day of the exam. I want you to lend the group a hand".

"That's something I'm rather sick of hearing".

No doubt Keisei and the others have been trying to persuade him as well behind my back. Still, Kouenji probably didn't budge an inch.

"You don't have to get spectacular scores. Just go about it normally".

"You don't get to decide that. I do. You know that, don't you? If you'll excuse me then".

Kouenji said so and moved to leave, but I grabbed his arm and stopped him. Since he tried to take a step forward without acknowledging it, I had no other choice but to step up my game and hold my ground.

I expected him to resist more strongly but for some reason, Kouenji relaxed instead.

"Fufufu. I see. So that's how it is, Ayanokouji Boy".

Kouenji, with his arm still in my grip, laughed quietly.

"What do you mean by 'that's how it is'?".

"I'm talking about the identity of the person who tamed Dragon Boy".

"Dragon.....what are you talking about?".

"I'm talking about the naughty boy named Ryuen".

"What do I have to do with that Ryuen?".

"Seems like you're pretty good at playing dumb. You don't let anything slip through when you feign indifference".

"I don't really know how you got to that conclusion".

"Right now, you're touching my arm like this. I can tell from the heat transmitted from that contact".

I had figured he's far from ordinary, but it looks like Kouenji's even more of an oddball than I am. So he's telling me the grip I have on his arm is what led him to that conclusion, huh?

"Sorry but this is a huge misunderstanding".

"Really? From the way Delinquent-kun's been looking at you, acting towards you and the way his surroundings react to that, I think this is a fact beyond all doubt".

Kouenji doesn't have any solid evidence but he seems to have overwhelming confidence in his own observations. More smoke and mirrors probably won't help.

"Fufu. You may relax. I have no intention of revealing what you're trying to keep secret. Even if you happen to be 'relatively talented', you're still a childish existence as far as I'm concerned. Just one among many. In other words, whether this is the truth or a lie, it won't matter as long as I don't speak of it, right?".

"I do want to clear up this misunderstanding, but what would that do?".

"It's unfortunate but you'll just have to give up on that. Even if multiple third parties vouch for you, telling me Ayanokouji Boy had nothing to do with it, this answer won't change as long as I am certain of it".

"I see.....then, shall we get back on topic?".

"I assume this is about trying to get me to work as part of the group?".

"Will you accept?".

"I've already said so over and over that I refuse".

His answer didn't change. He said so decisively.

"I will act however I please. That is my philosophy. Whether to take this exam or not, or what my score will be. All of these things will depend on my mood at that moment".

"....I see".

I had considered various means of persuasion, but clumsily trying them here could easily backfire on me. I'll have to leave this one to chance. But ultimately, there's a high possibility this could lead to the minimum amount of damage being sustained.

It's clear as day Kouenji wants to avoid the punishment known as expulsion. I'll just have to bet on that. All I could do was bid farewell to Kouenji as he left to hunt the wild boar.

"Doesn't seem like anyone can manipulate that man".

It doesn't matter if it's the older Horikita or Nagumo or his comrades.

That's my honest opinion of the classmate I've spent roughly one year with.

Leaving Kouenji behind in the forest, I made my way back to the course. I've only been gone for less than 10 minutes but we're probably in last place right now. I didn't see any students from my group either in front of me or behind and so I decided to skip ahead and chase them down. After a while, I spotted

Keisei and the others walking. Tokitou noticed me first with the rest turning to look at me after that.

"For the record, I did find him but.....".

"As I thought, it didn't work, did it?".

Hashimoto, who predicted this would happen, smiled bitterly. The other students too, didn't blame me but rather complained about the absent Kouenji. While insulting Kouenji the whole way, we somehow managed to reach the turnaround point where Chabashira is waiting for us with her arms crossed. I hadn't seen her in a few days but it looks like she's been helping out with various lessons here on the regular.

"The 2nd years and 3rd years have all turned back. Now's your turn".

"What time is it, sensei?".

"Approximately 11 o'clock".

This means there's still one hour left to go until our afternoon break.

If this had been a flat, even road then it wouldn't have been difficult. There'd be plenty of time left to spare. But this is a winding nine kilometers long road with a sudden and steep incline. We'll be exhausting ourselves quite a bit.

If we don't run at the proper pace, this is going to take a chunk out of our lunch break.

"I'm going ahead. I don't want to be late for my lunch".

"Wait. We already decided there's got to be a rollcall before you do that. Each person states their class and name".

A board was brought out. Students who have successfully made it to the turnaround point will probably be recorded on it. Once that's done, Ishizaki left the group behind and ran off.

Looks like this is going to be every man for himself rather than a group effort.

Albert also followed him.

"Let's go, Kiyotaka".

"Please go ahead. I'd like to wait and see if Kouenji's coming back or not".

"That's fine but.....we only have one hour, you know?".

"I'm confident I'm fast enough. It'll be fine".

"Short distance running and long distance running are two different things, you know.....well, I guess it's not my place to say though".

Laughing derisively at himself, Keisei started running awkwardly.

"Then I'm going ahead".

"Sure".

The last one left, Hashimoto, stretched and ran off too. Chabashira and I are the only ones left here now.

"I don't suppose you have something you'd like to discuss with me".

"I'm just waiting for Kouenji. And besides, it'll be problematic if I don't go soon since I'm already last in line".

"Problematic, you say?".

It's not a big deal. If a student as fit as Ishizaki went ahead and finishes it, the students who seem like they'd withdraw halfway through won't even notice it. We're not being timed. We just have to finish it within the time allocated to us. It doesn't matter whether we finish this in an hour or in four hours, we will still be evaluated the same way.

Keisei isn't the fittest person around but he pushes himself so as to not be a liability. And then, roughly 20 minutes later, that man came back.

"This looks like the turnaround point".

He's got leaves and dirt stuck to his jersey. Evidence that he had been moving

around quite a bit.

"You're the last one, Kouenji. You've got 40 minutes left".

"That seems to be the case. I should've taken my time but my encounter with the wild boar ended sooner than I had expected, you see".

"Wild boar?".

Chabashira questioned that sudden, absurd word but Kouenji quickly turned around and ran off.

"Kouenji. Rollcall. You'll be disqualified otherwise".

As Chabashira called out to him, Kouenji named himself without looking back.

"My name is Kouenji Rokusuke. Make sure to remember it, Teacher".

A majestic laughter echoes through the hills.

"Are you fine with that, sensei? He didn't state his class though".

"Since he's named himself, let's just overlook the rest".

"Then I'll also be heading back".

Since I left late, I wonder how much time's passed.

I saw the signboard warning us of wild boars again and around that point, I saw the backs of two male students. One of them is Keisei, who's within the range of expectation.

Rather than having exhausted himself past his limits, he's walking while holding onto the student beside him with his left leg seemingly in pain.

And the other is Hashimoto, who I expected to have already overtaken Keisei from the start. As I ran over to them, the situation became clear.

"Did you sprain it?".

"Ayanokouji, huh? Yeah, looks like it. The turnaround point was the limit for

his legs".

Hashimoto explained in place of Keisei.

It must be a burden on him having to hold up another person, but he showed no sign of minding it. He walked slowly while supporting him without any displeasure.

"This is pathetic.....why can't I even do something like this.....?".

He seems frustrated, but he's already thinking differently from the old Keisei. I thought he found it difficult to understand sports and other miscellaneous exams since he believed academics to be the focus for a student.

Looks like his reason for stretching and running last is the same as mine.

"I'll help too".

Two's better than one. I went around to the other side opposite of Hashimoto and supported Keisei.

"...please wait. If you do something like this, both of you will be late for lunch".

"If we left you alone, you'd run recklessly, wouldn't you? You'd injure your legs even further and that's a problem for the rest of us in this exam. If we can lessen the extent of your injury by missing one lunch break then that's a cheap price to pay, isn't that right, Ayanokouji?".

"That's right, that might be true".

"But.....".

"It's a coincidence that the two of us ran behind, so don't hold back".

After I said that, Hashimoto corrected something.

"Make that three. That Kouenji's also descending insanely fast. That guy's a

monster".

"I get the image he's got limitless physical strength. No doubt he's number one in our school year".

It's not like I'm flattering him. I'm just speaking honestly of Kouenji's potential.

"Maybe our Class A got spared from Kouenji because of his terrible attitude. Rather than making himself useful, this exam made it clear to me he's a hindrance for Class C".

Certainly, if Kouenji utilizes his potential to its fullest he'd be a menace. I can't say whether it's a good thing to count him as a secret weapon or not if we can't make use of him though.

Ultimately, we brought the injured Keisei back to the outdoor school at around 12:40. After that, Keisei received treatment in the infirmary.

Hashimoto and I waited in the corridor. After about 10 minutes, Keisei came back.

"How did it go?".

As Hashimoto asked him that, Keisei smiled bitterly and replied.

"It's just a light sprain. It wasn't a big deal, thanks to the two of you helping me".

He seems to be compensating for his left leg a bit but it does seem like he can walk normally.

"There's not much time left until the exam. You need to be careful to not let it get any worse".

Hashimoto said that and tapped Keisei lightly on the shoulder.

"I know you helped me and all but.....".

After hearing that, Hashimoto immediately got the message.

"Don't worry about it. I'll keep it a secret. That's more convenient for you, right?".

Hashimoto seems to have understood even without having to hear what he had to say and so Keisei patted himself on the chest.

3

Since I missed out on lunch, I was more excited than usual about today's dinner. After securing my seat, I immediately began eating my meal.

"Kiyopon, is the seat beside you free?".

I heard Haruka's voice. When I turned to look, all the members of the Ayanokouji Group had assembled.

"Good grief, Kiyopon's been hard to find these past few days".

"...sorry. I didn't really know what to do in a cafeteria this spacious".

Since we're all supposed to be acting together in groups, it must have been difficult to assemble the usual members of the group. Since there aren't enough seats where I'm sitting, I moved to a place that could accomodate all five of us.

"I-It's been a while, Kiyotaka-kun".

Airi said bashfully. It certainly is unusual for us to not talk to one another at all for around a week. Because even during the long holidays, we'd call each other or meet up.

"More importantly, is Miyachi doing alright? You're with Ryuen-kun, right?".

Haruka questioned Akito about that. Perhaps she heard about him from somewhere too.

"Well, somehow I guess. I am keeping my guard up around him but he doesn't

really seem any different than usual. He's even taking our lessons very seriously".

"Even during Zazen and the long-distance relay?".

"Yeah. He's so normal it's almost scary. On the contrary, he's holding himself together far better than the clumsier ones. It's just, I tried talking to him a few times but he didn't seem like he wanted to hang out with anybody".

"Maybe the shock of losing a fight made him go nuts?".

"I don't know about that. He's not really the type of person who dwells on the past".

Akito braced himself, as though saying he can't afford to let his guard down.

"More importantly, what about you? Are you getting along well with the others?".

"Me? Nothing much going on with me. I'm not really close with anyone and I'm not really quarrelling with anyone either. Airi and I are in the same group so that suits me just fine".

"I'm glad Haruka-chan's there for me".

Apparently the two of them are in the same group. It must be very reassuring to have even one intimate friend there with you.

"Looks like our group's the biggest problem, Kiyotaka".

"Maybe so".

"Ehh, really?".

Haruka and Airi looked at each other, as though saying they haven't heard any rumors in particular.

"There's Kouenji, who doesn't listen to anyone, and Ishizaki, who snaps at just about anyone, there after all. We can't control him either. Maybe that's

because Albert's there with him. They really are a pain".

"So Kouenji-kun's with you too.....are you ok, Kiyotaka-kun?".

"He's not exactly directly harmful".

"If anything, Ishizaki's the problem, right? Maybe he's acting all high and mighty because Ryuen-kun got beaten? Up until a while ago, he was nothing more than a lackey".

As for Ishizaki, I feel like him being put in the same group with me is the main cause for this. Feeling anger and frustration without any outlet, he may be taking it out on anyone who isn't me.

"In any case, I need to work hard too as the leader.....".

Keisei, with a bomb strapped onto him, is desperately trying to unite the group somehow.

"You boys have it rough too~".

"S-Somehow I feel like we're the ones out of place here".

"Isn't that just fine? If you guys are doing fine, then that also puts our minds at ease. Right?".

What Akito says is correct.

Even though I'm getting information from Kei, there are still parts of the girls' situation I cannot see. If Haruka and Airi are in the same group, advancing steadily without any problems whatsoever, then that just means we can afford to focus more on ourselves.

It's finally Tuesday, the 6th day of our training camp. And as such, I began to hear some rather strange complaints coming from the boys. That they're

starting to miss the opposite sex. Complaints like that. Somehow, I feel like the number of boys looking forward to dinner has increased.

Being surrounded by boys like yourself certainly is calming but it's not exactly glamorous.

"Ahh, shit. I feel like I'm starting to lose my mind surrounded by guys".

"I'd already be dead if this were a boys' school".

That opinion was expressed equally by everyone in the group.

"Anyways, it's starting to stink with only the guys around".

It's inevitable that in time, he'd get the image of us being a sweaty bunch. But the truth is, there aren't many students who are even sweating here. I'm just grateful it's not summer.

But personally, I feel rather at ease being with the guys. It bears repeating since it's important.

"Ahh, my hips.....".

While we were in the middle of cleaning, Keisei screamed and crouched down right there and then. Every day, no matter what lessons are held, we are to clean and prepare breakfast.

Students who aren't very fit are reaching their limit. Keisei, who has admitted to not having much confidence in his own physical abilities, complains about the pain. The area we're to clean is a large one and therefore our group, which is already a small one, must work harder than the others since even losing one man would hurt us.

"What do you mean your hips hurt? Do it properly".

Ishizaki approached Keisei and forcibly pulled him up by the arm.

"I-I know that. I'll do it properly so please let go of me".

"Then do it properly".

Ishizaki spat that out and went back to his own job.

Keisei immediately tried to resume cleaning, but his body wouldn't move properly. In particular, it was clear that he can't move the leg he sprained too well.

"Kuu".

Keisei softly moaned. He seems to be enduring the pain but if he pushes himself too far, it'll have an effect on tomorrow.

"Take a break, I can take your place".

Since there's no helping it, I decided to clean the spot Keisei's cleaning in his stead.

"Sorry about this, Kiyotaka".

"We help each other out when one's in trouble".

And this should solve the problem. However...

"You just said you'd do it yourself, didn't you?".

Perhaps he didn't like the fact that I was lending a helping hand, Ishizaki interrupted like that. But without making eye contact with me.

"I can handle it here".

I replied. But Ishizaki doesn't seem to be satisfied with that answer. He continues speaking harshly towards Keisei while determinedly ignoring me.

"You're the leader, aren't you? Don't complain about something like cleaning".

"...I know that".

Keisei's feeling responsible. It's inevitable he'd answer like that when pressed.

"You don't get it. Right now you're trying to push it onto someone else. I don't

like it that you're doing that. Say you'll do it yourself".

"...I get it. I'll do it".

"That's what I'm talking about. Whatever you do, don't lend him a hand, Ayanokouji".

Ishizaki spoke to me for the first time. And then immediately distanced himself from me as though in escape.

"Even if it means Keisei will injure himself in the process?".

"If he gets injured enough that he can't keep going then that's it for him".

Apparently Ishizaki won't acknowledge any attempt to help Keisei out even if it comes at the expense of the group.

Albert silently went up to Ishizaki and tried to say something but it doesn't look like he's willing to listen.

"Sorry, Kiyotaka. Looks like I'll just have to hang in there".

Probably because he felt that the group's mood would worsen if he didn't do so. Over the past few days, Ishizaki probably hasn't been too happy about Keisei's attitude.

Perhaps he couldn't let the fact that Keisei came here only to rely on someone else slide. And Keisei also understood that, which is why he took the warning to heart and decided to do it himself.

Still, pushing himself too far here may have consequences later down the line.

Even if he holds out for today, there's no telling what will happen tomorrow. The actual exam itself includes physically taxing assessments such as Zazen and the long-distance relay.

When that time comes, he may suffer even more than he's suffering right now. I'd like to inform Ishizaki of that somehow but it doesn't look like it's going

to be that simple.

"Oi, Ishizaki. That's taking it too far".

Yahiko, having seen the situation play out, rebuked Ishizaki.

"It's his fault for not even being able to clean properly, right?".

"I know that. But in that case, what about him? Go warn him too".

Yahiko said that and pointed at Kouenji, who had yet to show any sign of cleaning since the very first day.

"I can't communicate with that guy in Japanese. I don't have time to persuade a gorilla".

It's not like he hadn't even warned him once since Ishizaki's already warned Kouenji many times over. Despite all that, he's showing no sign of doing anything and so Ishizaki gave up.

In that sense, the difference between Keisei and Kouenji would be that you could communicate with one of them.

"If you've got a problem with that then you go and persuade him yourself. It'll just be a waste of your time though".

"That's.....alright, I just have to go for it, right?".

Yahiko grabbed a nearby broom and walked towards Kouenji.

"It's pointless. Just wait and see".

Ishizaki laughed mockingly. Yahiko pushed the broom onto Kouenji and tried persuading him to clean too. But after a few minutes of doing so, he fled while looking completely exhausted.

Even though we've been part of the same group for a few days now, in the end we're still enemies. There's no way it would go well. The majority of students probably want to disband this group as soon as possible. However, the

important thing here is that not every group is like ours. Even if it's only superficial, it's also true that there are groups that are deepening ties between themselves to the point they're almost like actual classmates.

This isn't limited to just the 1st years but rather, the same phenomenon can be observed in the senior students who have stabilized interclass relations. It's because they all probably understand that cooperating here is also for their own sakes.

Students who are able to think ahead and students who act solely out of malevolence.

Unless there's an overwhelming difference in ability, it's not that hard to predict the outcome.

"Ahh, I can't do this. This is way too stupid. Why do I have to play friends with the guys from the other classes? Right, Albert?"

Albert did not agree with or deny that but Ishizaki continued to speak alone.

"I hate this group from the bottom of my heart. That gorilla Kouenji and also that mouthy Yukimura who can't even do marathon training properly. That silly Class B and the Class A that doesn't do anything at all. So damn idiotic".

Slam. Ishizaki kicks the broom.

"You're free to badmouth us all you want but please do the cleaning".

"Shut it. Kouenji's not doing it so why should I?"

"Then you don't have any right to warn Yukimura in the first place, do you?"

Hashimoto tried to explain that but Ishizaki is no longer listening. He abandoned cleaning altogether. 'Toilet' was all he said before he left. Unable to stop him, Keisei bit his lips in frustration.

"Keisei, it's best if you stop trying to shoulder everything. You can't change anything in the one or two days left. You may come to regret it later if you make

a mistake in your judgement right now".

I gave him that piece of advice. No, I tried to confirm that again with him.

"I get that, but there's no other way, is there? If I rely on someone else, Ishizaki will alienate himself more and more from the group. But if I don't do anything then the probability of our group being in last place is high. In that case, I have to do it regardless of whether it's reckless or not, right?"

If there's no other way except what Keisei just said then the option of recklessly going at it certainly would be the best one out of the options available. If there are no available options then one must somehow forge a new path.

However, right now it doesn't seem like Keisei's up to the task of forging that new path or in other words, creating an option.

Someone who is capable of understanding this group and taking action for the sake of others. I looked at Hashimoto, the man quietly cleaning away. Stopping Ishizaki from going after Kouenji on the second day, he gives me the impression of someone who's making sure to bring the group together from an appropriate distance. He also acted perfectly during marathon training.

I don't know how highly Sakayanagi and Katsuragi value him but I believe he's a highly capable man. This is based on the assumption that I'd be fighting him as an enemy but even more than the aggressive Sakayanagi and the conservative Katsuragi, he's someone who's hard to read and therefore, hard to fight against.

"For the record, don't forget that I'm here too. If there's anything troubling you, I'll help out as much as I can".

"Thank you, Kiyotaka. Hearing that puts me at ease a bit".

If these words can put Keisei at ease then it's nothing much for me to say them.

After that, I cannot say that my group is doing well, even as flattery. Despite feeling responsible, Keisei was unable to properly issue his orders as our leader and Ishizaki stopped talking to everyone else except Albert. Even during mealtime, which is the one and only opportunity we have to reconcile with each other, our group did not assemble.

I suppose I'll put the boys aside for now.

Because there's nothing I can do for this group anyway. Because even if I am to give advice to the struggling Keisei and the antagonistic Ishizaki, I have no intention of acting directly to save them after all.

As my first step towards leaving the stage, getting deeply involved here would be against my interests. I then remembered Haruka and Airi and decided to investigate the movements of the girls once again.

However, it's not easy to make contact with Kei again. She probably have matters to attend to as well and suspicion may be cast on our relationship if we repeatedly make contact like that.

Besides, the information I want to get my hands on isn't information on the 1st year girls but rather, the 2nd and 3rd year seniors. The true intentions of Nagumo, who challenged the older Horikita to a match. I'd like to confirm it.

In that case, the number of people I can approach becomes even more limited. For that reason, I tried making contact with Kiriya by leaving behind a trace he could get a hint from but Kiriya is still part of Nagumo's group. Even if he resents the man deep down inside, he probably won't give any advice this time.

I'd like to attack from a different direction, from beyond the scope of Nagumo's expectations. And that led me to realize the existence of a certain

person. I had Kei investigate a certain 2nd year girl.

That person is 'Asahina Nazuna'.

A person who happens to belong to the same class as Nagumo Miyabi and who is also personally close to Nagumo. I've seen Asahina eating her meals in this large cafeteria with her friends many times.

And today, I closely observed Asahina's movements from a slight distance away. She's not part of the student council but she's considerably influential in her class and apparently she's even a big influence on Nagumo.

There are several other boys and girls who are close to Nagumo but there are two reasons why I chose Asahina as my source of information.

The first reason is that despite her rough appearance and mannerisms, she's very dutiful and never forgets a debt owed. And also that she does not worship Nagumo.

And the other reason is that the two of us have had a 'coincidental' meeting.

The problem with acquiring information about Nagumo is that the entirety of the 2nd years are all subservient to Nagumo. If I clumsily make contact, I run the risk of giving away information on myself.

In regards to that, I need to narrow down someone least likely to leak information. That is why our 'coincidental' meeting will become a powerful weapon.

Information that I alone could possibly know. Information that only Asahina could possibly understand. I thought I'd use the products of that coincidence.

Coincidence. By that, I mean the 'amulet'. It's something she dropped a while back that I coincidentally happened to pick up. At the time I didn't think much of it before handing it over but apparently it's something unexpectedly precious

to her.

The evidence supporting that claim is the fact that she brought that item along with her even to this training camp. I was also able to confirm that she carefully keeps it on her body at all times.

Occasionally a connection that's formed through coincidence can prove to be stronger than a connection deliberately forged.

Using that coincidence, I should at least ascertain whether or not she can become an existence that I can draw information regarding Nagumo out of. It's also precisely because we're in the middle of the training camp that making contact with her is easy.

Now the only remaining problem is how to turn this indirect meeting into a direct one. If I openly approach Asahina, she or someone around her may report it back to Nagumo.

I'd like to avoid that. I've been looking for an opening the entire time but during dinner, Asahina almost always spends her time with someone else. I couldn't find an opening to be alone with her.

And today, that golden opportunity arose.

"I'm going to the toilet".

Just like that, Asahina stopped in the middle of eating her dinner. Strangely enough for a girl, no one else went along with her and so I immediately followed Asahina. It wouldn't do to get in the way of her toilet break and so I decided to patiently wait for her to return. In all likelihood, I only have around five minutes at most to talk to her.

More importantly than that, Asahina herself may be reluctant.

I don't know how close I can get to her in that five minutes. There's an absolute need to emphasize the 'coincidental' part. Not too long after that, Asahina came back.

As usual, she's wearing her amulet on her left wrist. I pretended to be casually passing her by.

"Hmm?".

I whispered in a way that made it seem as though I could either be walking to myself or calling out to Asahina. And when I did, Asahina unexpectedly stopped and turned around.

If I don't respond to that, Asahina will probably assume I was only talking to myself and leave. In this short window, I took action.

"Ahh, I'm sorry. I just thought I've seen that amulet before a while back. Please don't mind me".

I said so and moved to leave. If she doesn't respond to that, I'm also prepared to start the conversation myself.

"This amulet isn't in stock at the school anymore though".

Since she properly replied to me, I'll continue without hesitating.

"Is that so? By any chance, did you happen to drop this amulet somewhere a while back?".

If I say that, Asahina should immediately understand.

"Could it be.....you're the one who picked up my amulet?".

"I wonder. I picked it up on my way back during the winter vacation though.....when exactly was it again.....?".

I didn't exactly say 'when' it was in detail. I pretended not to remember.

"I don't believe I'm mistaken. I see, so it was you".

Asahina happily laughed and approached me.

"Thank you. After I realized I dropped it somewhere, it's really been troubling me. Ever since then I've been feeling scared so I started wearing it always like

this, you see".

She bashfully looked at her wrist.

"This amulet is something I bought in this school. So it's not like I have any strong attachment in particular to it. It's just, how should I put it, it's like my mental support? When I have this in hand I feel really at peace. That's why when I lose it, it feels like an omen that bad things are going to happen and that makes me anxious. That's why I was really happy knowing someone picked it up and handed it over".

The purpose of an amulet, in the first place, is to do exactly that.

"To think the person who picked it up would be you".

"Do you know me?".

"You drew a lot of attention during that relay against Horikita-senpai. A while ago, Miyabi. No, President Nagumo also spoke with you right?".

"Could it be that you were there?".

Of course, I knew that already. Ichinose was also there that day.

"Well, I suppose".

I'll make it look like I didn't notice Asahina until today. Because if I mess it up and let her know I already noticed her from a while back, she seems like the type to become more guarded towards me.

Since picking up the amulet is nothing more than a coincidence, this meeting too, must be a coincidence.

"I'm rather confident in my speed but to tell you the truth, that's about the only thing I'm good at. Perhaps I've caught President Nagumo's eye due to some misunderstanding".

I said so as though that's troubling me and Asahina nodded repeatedly as though in understanding.

"That guy respects Horikita-senpai. Or rather, he's made that a goal of his so when he wasn't taken seriously at that relay, he must've gotten jealous of you".

I couldn't sense any ulterior motive behind Asahina's words.

For better or for worse, she's got an honest personality. I decided to step it up a bit.

"How can I get Nagumo-senpai's attention off my back?".

"How about you beat him then? Like taking that arrogant Miyabi down a peg or two. I'd personally like Miyabi to lose a bit too".

She said so while laughing. Of course, it's probably just a joke without any serious intent behind it. However, I boldly picked up on that.

"I see, that might also be an option".

When I replied like that, Asahina immediately looked dumbfounded and looked at me. After a few seconds, she burst out in laughter.

"Ahahaha! Come on, I was just joking. Couldn't you tell?".

Asahina laughed herself almost to tears and hit me on the shoulder.

"If Nagumo falls, would that trouble you after all then?".

Since Asahina still thinks I'm joking, I decided to take a stronger tone with her.

If Asahina is the type of person to report this to Nagumo then either way, that's it for me. Even if she reports it to him right now, it'll end with her thinking I'm just a cheeky 1st year.

"Are you serious?".

"You were joking, weren't you, senpai?".

"Look here, this isn't something a 1st year can do anything about".

She said that and apologized for joking. But I continued with that exact same

tone.

"Among all the 2nd years I've seen up until now, Asahina-senpai looks like the most straightforward one".

".....the most straightforward one?".

"Because it's very difficult to acquire information from the 2nd years that 'Nagumo Miyabi' rules over, you see".

"You're saying something rather outrageous. I'm also a 2nd year. Miyabi and I actually have a 'deep relationship', you know?".

"It's not about shallow or deep, it's about how much you've been influenced by him. That's the important part".

Either way, since they're in the same class there's no way they could possibly be enemies. No matter what she thinks about Nagumo, she probably wouldn't want her class to be disadvantaged.

"I think they're similar though".

"Well, please just think of it as a 1st year's nonsense".

And with that I bowed my head.

"Please excuse me".

"Ahh, wait a minute. Somehow, this makes me feel like I'm the villain here".

She breathes out and then smiled.

"I understand you're not joking. That's why as an apology, please let me repay you for picking up my amulet. If there's anything you'd like to ask me, I'll answer".

"Are you fine with that? I may point an arrow at Nagumo-senpai, you know".

"To be completely honest with you, I don't really think the situation will change any just because I talk to you".

She seems to be certain that even if she gives me information on some of the 2nd years, it won't have a major influence.

In other words, it's information that would be pointless even if known. If that's how she sees this, then I'm extremely grateful for that.

"Among the 2nd year girls, how many are particularly intimate with Nagumo-senpai?".

"Girls who are intimate with him? Like all of them. Because they trust Miyabi more than any other boy, you see---".

I do know that he's not the sort of enemy ordinary methods will work against but he's got a really wide range.

"What about the people most likely to act as Nagumo-senpai's pawns?".

"Do you think I'll tell you that much?".

"As a senpai, you wouldn't mind giving the 1st years a little credit, would you?".

"You're saying that? You're a cheeky one".

She said so and laughed. But she didn't seem against it.

"Well, it's not like it's my place to say that or anything though. The 2nd years have a strong sense of camaraderie. Honestly, we 2nd years split up into groups way faster than both the 1st and 3rd years, didn't we? After we received the explanation on the bus, we immediately shared information between classes on Miyabi's command".

They should technically be enemies but as I suspected, they seem to be in a state of cooperation.

Asahina told me the names of each class's representative. Maintaining contact between the four buses, they were able to decide on their small groups to a certain degree. It appears the girls also did something similar.

"What about when you linked up with the 1st year and 3rd year groups? Did you randomly decide on those as well?"

Nagumo's proposal for the boys was a draft-based system performed by the 1st years.

"Ehh? Pretty much".

"Pretty much? Does that mean there's an exception?"

Asahina seemed deep in thought while she crossed her arms.

"...why exactly?"

I could tell that Asahina's now harboring doubts. Perhaps she didn't find a resolution immediately, since the silence continued.

"Are you not going to tell me?"

"No, that's not it. There was a request made by the 2nd year girls when forming the large groups. Or rather, they made some adjustments. That small group consisted of people that Nagumo could count on".

If the groups are formed based on Nagumo's orders, then there's the possibility that they were entrusted with a special role. It's a conclusion you wouldn't be able to draw unless you know about the internal affairs of the 2nd years.

From the perspective of the 1st and 3rd years, it'll only appear to be friends flocking to each other.

"Are there any prominent 1st year or 3rd year students from that large group that those girls belong to?"

"Even if you ask me that, I don't really know much about the 1st years. But I guess from the 3rd years, there's Tachibana-senpai who used to be Horikita-senpai's secretary. Ahh, but the leader is someone else. So nothing strange's going to happen, I'm telling you. In the first place, Miyabi already said he wants to fight fair-and-square, didn't he?"

"You have quite a lot of faith in Nagumo-senpai".

The older Horikita too, seemed to have some measure of faith in Nagumo's words. If I am to believe the older Horikita and Asahina's words, then this whole chain of suspicion would be labelled 'fake'. That he's trying to use the suspicion that he'll use some other method while promising to fight fair-and-square to throw us off and ruin our focus.

"He always keeps his promises. That's why he won't fight dirty. In the first place, even if the girls' group springs some sort of trap, it won't have any effect on Horikita-senpai and Miyabi's fight, will it?".

"That's right. That is, without a doubt, irrelevant".

Asahina's doubts are quite right. Nagumo's proposal was that his group and the older Horikita's group have a match. It has nothing to do with the girls. That's why even if the girls who are especially intimate with Nagumo happen to be in the same group as Tachibana, it would still be irrelevant.

It means pretending to fight openly while planning something underhanded yet having it turn out to be an open fight in the end.

So that would mean that the seemingly meaningful words he spoke when making contact with Ishikura-senpai of the 3rd years was also a fake out. If we're talking about normally sounding someone out, it would be something like having several pieces appear before they fall away and disappear. A rather interesting way of doing it.

Unlike Sakayanagi or Ryuen, this is a strategy with its own unique style to it.

"Now then, if there's anything I have in particular to say it's that it's your loss if you care about that".

"You were a great help".

I should thank Asahina for listening to my unreasonable request and telling me about their internal affairs. Of course, looking at it from Asahina's perspective, she doesn't think what she did here would get in Miyabi's way at all.

Because she probably doesn't think someone like me could possibly become an enemy.

"Well, do your best and go scare the hell out of Miyabi. I'll be rooting for you, just a bit".

"Ahh, and also there's just one more thing".

"Hmm?".

Combining this with the information I got from Kei, the accuracy increases even further.

I decided to step it up a bit more.

6

The night of the sixth day fell with the group in a foul mood. If we let this day end like this, the group probably won't even form up tomorrow. I expect this terrible relationship to drag on.

And if so, it will prove difficult to obtain a high score in the exam that awaits us in two days time. Even after I returned to the room after bathing, the mood in here is as foul as ever.

Ishizaki's putting up a wall around himself, not talking to anyone else. Keisei's also severely blaming himself and trapped in his own shell, he's not even speaking. The Class B students, in an attempt to liven us up, continued to excitedly chat repeatedly but no longer able to stand the oppressive atmosphere around them, they eventually fell silent too.

Eventually, after confirming that it's almost lights out time, Yahiko turned the power off in our room. In order to quickly put an end to this day.

"Hey, Ishizaki. Can I have some of your time?".

In the darkness, it was Hashimoto who broke that long silence.

"No you can't".

Hashimoto called out to him from atop his bunk but Ishizaki rejected him. Judging from the sound of the sheets shuffling, I suppose he's turned his back towards us.

"If we keep this up, our group's probably in big trouble. We may possess some advantages because there's only a few of us but in exchange, we bear several disadvantages when it comes to the contents of the exam. In the worst case scenario, Yukimura and someone else may be expelled".

If so, wouldn't Ishizaki be the one to get dragged down? Is the implication of that remark.

"Shut it. I don't care whether it's expulsion or whatever".

"Good grief.....".

It appeared that although Hashimoto extended a helping hand, Ishizaki rejected it. Hashimoto sighed as though giving up.

".....fuu---".

I couldn't see Hashimoto's face in the dark. Does this mean our group can no longer return to a functional state? It was about time we gave up.

"I played soccer during elementary and middle school. It was a prestigious school so every year our team would play in the nationals. We weren't aces by any measure but we played matches on the regular and we did relatively well for ourselves".

Hashimoto said those words not to any person in particular, but to everyone in the room.

"You aren't in the soccer club, are you? You don't seem injured to me either".

Yahiko pointed that out in the dark.

"Yeah. I know it isn't all that popular nowadays but there was a time when I used to smoke".

"So you were kicked out when they found out?"

"No. I made sure to smoke in secret. Only my family knew about it".

"Even if smoking's no good, it's not a reason to quit playing soccer".

Yahiko's doubts are spot on. If it isn't revealed to anyone, then there'd be no problem.

"I felt alienated. While everyone was united in their goal of winning the nationals, I alone observed that coldly. I felt like I didn't belong there. And also, I probably didn't like soccer all that much either. That's why I could easily quit soccer and study. I was quite capable in the first place so it wasn't really that difficult for me to keep up with my studies".

"Are you bragging? I can't listen to this".

Ishizaki disagreeably interjected.

"For better or for worse, all I could manage was to do passably well. But sometimes I do feel regret. When I see Hirata and Shibata, practicing hard on the grounds, I end up thinking that it could have been me there. Even though I didn't like it all that much. Isn't it strange?"

Hashimoto laughed self-deprecatingly.

"What about you? What was your childhood like, Ishizaki?"

"Huh? Why are you asking me?"

"For no particular reason".

"Hah.....I have nothing to say".

He refused to talk by saying he had nothing to talk about. Keisei then opened his mouth to join in the conversation happening in the dark.

"Ever since I was little, studying was all I did. Maybe I was influenced by my older sister who aspired to be a teacher, I always acted the role of the model student. Ever since elementary, she'd give me problems that are almost absurdly difficult to solve. She's a pretty unreasonable sister".

"So that's how you became so good at studying?".

Hashimoto, as though drawing out the conversation, asked that of Keisei.

"Yeah. And also, I'm no good at sports. No matter what I did I could only barely pass most of the time. I decided not to overcome my weakness and instead improve on my strengths. Because I thought that with the exception of those aiming to become professional athletes, improving your physical abilities is pointless. After enrolling in this school, I was faced with several doubts. I never once doubted that someone like me who could study better than anyone else was most suited for Class A".

As though reminiscing, Keisei stopped speaking and thought for a little while. The class Keisei was assigned to was Class D. The despair he must have felt at the time must have been immeasurable.

"After that, things I couldn't accept happened one after another. I couldn't accept the joint responsibility system of the class and I couldn't comprehend the lifestyle we had to live on the uninhabited island.....in our class, Sudou was my polar opposite. Even though he excelled at sports, he couldn't study. At first I thought I had been given an absurd burden to bear. But on the uninhabited island and during the sports festival, Sudou was far more useful than I was. I saw that shining figure of his beside me".

There was some frustration in his words.

"To be honest, there are still some things I can't accept. But I'm slowly starting to realize too. That if studying's the only thing you can do or if sports is the only thing you're good at, that's no good. This applies to this exam as well. If we can't do both those things, we won't be able to obtain a good score. Am I wrong, Ishizaki?".

Keisei then turned the conversation towards Ishizaki.

"Then why did you---".

"Just like during the sports festival and back on the uninhabited island, I'm filled with feelings of humiliation. I'm being a liability to the group. I hurt myself and end up increasing the burden on someone else. Most importantly, I ended up lowering our morale. I wasn't able to show anything to Ishizaki, who contributed to the group more than the average person despite his complaints".

Ishizaki, who was about to mock him, stopped himself. You cannot see anything. It's precisely because we're in the dark where we cannot see the other person's face that we are able to expose things like this.

"I'm sorry, Ishizaki...that the leader who should be setting the example is in a condition like this".

He tried to choke it back but I could tell that Keisei is crying. But nobody's uncouth enough to interject. It's not like he's crying because he wants to, these are tears of frustration.

"Don't screw around, why are you apologizing.....I mean, I'm the one who blamed you.....".

Ishizaki scornfully laughed at himself and continued.

"In the first place, you accepted the role of leader when nobody else would".

Even if it were pushed onto him, he could've refused. As a matter of fact, Ishizaki himself refused it.

Ishizaki probably realized Keisei's goodwill in accepting it.

"I didn't like taking orders from you but without those orders, the group would probably be even worse off. Both when it comes to making breakfast and the marathon training".

"No doubt about that".

Hashimoto said so while laughing.

Students who excel in academics, students who don't excel in academics. Students who excel at sports and students who don't excel at sports. All different sorts of students gather to form one class or one group.

There are problems to be found there too like enemies and allies. Here and there, Yahiko and the other students began chatting.

On this day and this night, for the first time, our group started acting like a proper group. That is what I felt.

Chapter 6: Things that Are Lost, Things that Aren't Lost

It's early morning on the seventh day of the training camp. Our group will cease to exist after today. The exam will be held first thing tomorrow morning. Although Hashimoto's actions saved the group from total collapse, this united group and the relationships we've built as part of it will also end along with the exam.

There are probably more than a few students feeling sad over it. The majority of the students in our group too, in spite of their antipathy towards Kouenji, are getting along well with each other.

Regarding Ishizaki, he probably hates me more than he hates Kouenji but he's doing his best not to let it show. To be honest, he probably wants to hound me but Ishizaki knows full well what will happen in that case. That rough demeanor of his may resemble Sudou but when it comes to reading the atmosphere, Ishizaki is far superior. I get the impression that he respects his opponents and acknowledges what cannot be denied. That's probably why Ryuuen kept him as his side too. But that doesn't necessarily mean Sudou is inferior to Ishizaki.

Sudou is far superior when it comes to the physical side of things and in all likelihood, Sudou surpasses him in academic ability as well. Since Horikita's guiding him, Sudou will probably continue to develop slowly. Even though they are a similar breed, the weapons each one of them possesses is fundamentally different.

"I'd like to go over the long-distance relay we'll be doing tomorrow. Please hear me out".

Everyone, while still on their respective beds, turn to look at Keisei.

"There's only 10 of us so each person needs to shoulder a huge burden but

depending on the circumstances, that may turn out to be our advantage".

"What do you mean? Isn't it better to have more people? Because then the distance we have to run decreases".

"Certainly if we have 15 to evenly split the burden between then each person won't have to shoulder all that burden but there's also the high probability that you'll have slow students mixed in as well. You can count the number of students who excel at long distance in our school year on one hand".

"...that is true".

"In other words, this is our chance to bridge that gap".

"But that's assuming that our whole group is an athletic bunch, right?".

Ishizaki looked around.

He probably counts me as one of the athletic ones but as long as he doesn't count Kouenji, it leaves Hashimoto as the only other person we can count on to run well.

You can't exactly call this a particularly athletic group. And most importantly...

"This is pathetic but after talking big like that, I probably won't be of any use".

Keisei knows himself best. Because out of everyone in this group, Keisei's the one whose stamina and speed are uncertain. However, as the leader, he told us of his strategy.

"The long-distance relay will be about 18 kilometers. That would mean each person must run for at least a minimum of 1.2 kilometers so that means in a group of 15, everyone would have to run about the same length of 1.2 kilometers each. But in a group of 10, we can make significant changes to the length a person is allocated".

"But we can't just declare injury and have someone else run that length for you, right?".

"Any injuries or sickness on that day will be penalized so that would not only render our numbers disadvantageous but cost us more time as well. That's not ideal. And also, it's important to note that unless we're talking 1.2 kilometers, we may not be able to get any points for switching out".

The school is doing everything it can to shut down any loopholes.

Students have to do what is required of them. Keisei and Yahiko, who both have no confidence in their own speed, must at least run a minimum of 1.2 kilometers.

We may have to include the three from Class B in that minimum category as well.

Albert's quite fast but he has problems with his stamina. If we have everyone else run only the bare minimum, that would mean the remaining four would have to run a length of 2.7 kilometers and more. If we're talking about a student whose stamina is his forte then they may very well be able to cover that distance. I told Keisei about my thoughts on this.

The members of our group listened to what I had to say.

"In that case, I'll run 3 kilometers...no, I'll do 3.6 kilometers".

Ishizaki declared. There's no doubt he's one of those in our group capable of running that. And another person raised his hand as though following suit.

"Well then, I guess I've got no other choice either. I'm not bad at running long distance or anything too after all".

Hashimoto was the one who said that.

The two representatives of our group eagerly swore to shoulder this large burden. This means we've covered 7.2 kilometers so far.

"Thank you".

Keisei lowered his head in gratitude and thanked them with honest words.

Following suit, I suppose I should also cover at least a certain extent too.

"Then...I'll do what I can. I don't know the amount of time I can do it in though".

"Are you fine with that, Kiyotaka?".

"Please just don't expect too much".

But what's truly important is what comes after. It's the existence of the man with the highest potential of them all, Kouenji, who even Sudou cannot compare against despite him priding himself on his athleticism.

The more Kouenji runs, the easier it'll be for the other students. He'll probably run the minimum length of 1.2 kilometers but he has yet to promise that he'll run any more than that.

Most importantly, there's no telling if he'll even run seriously or not. Even if the nine of us, including me, run our best, if Kouenji merely walks without taking it seriously then it'll still be hopeless.

"Kouenji. I'd like for you to run as well".

It's precisely because he's aware of the weak link in the chain that Keisei went over to Kouenji with a disarming attitude and lowered his head.

Said Kouenji was busy admiring his fingernails while grinning on top of his bed.

"Kouenji".

Keisei calmly called his name one more time.

"Of course I'll run too. But unlike them, I do not care much about running long distances".

I suppose there's no way he'd agree to do so with an immediate reply.

Ishizaki glared at Kouenji but did not do much else. After spending a few days with him, he had begun to understand that most of Kouenji's actions have no meaning behind them.

"I'd like to avoid running the risk of having our group be dead last".

"That's right. I know what you want to say, Glasses-kun".

Taking his eyes off his fingernails, Kouenji looked down at Keisei.

"Even if long distance is impossible, I'd like you to run at least 1.2 kilometers seriously".

Everyone in our group looked towards Kouenji.

"I can't make any promises. Even if our group is dead last overall, it's not like that means I'll be expelled. Only you, the leader, will be expelled. And you surely won't do something inhuman such as dragging down a fellow classmate like me, will you?".

If the leader hadn't been Keisei but rather someone like Ishizaki or Yahiko then perhaps Kouenji would have run.

But since we're talking about Keisei, a fellow classmate, he figured he wouldn't be dragged down. Perhaps if we threatened to drag him down right now then we might get Kouenji to run but in exchange, we will never again be able to obtain cooperation from Kouenji.

".....then please tell me. What do we have to do to get you to cooperate? If giving you private points gets you to run then I don't mind paying up".

It's precisely because Keisei knows he's going to be a liability that he intends to compensate for it at his own expense.

"Don't carry that burden alone, Yukimura. It's not much, but I've got points too".

"I'll pay too".

Ishizaki and Hashimoto after him, then Yahiko and the others also supported him. Many a little makes a mickle. If the nine of us pool together our private points then we'd end up with a relatively large sum.

In response to the pressure of the group's collective demand, Kouenji---

"Unfortunately, I don't have any problems as far as private points are concerned. Besides, even if I don't have any points I can still lead a fulfilling school life, you see".

Even the feelings of a united group failed to reach him one bit. As I feared, Kouenji won't move just by offering him a paltry sum. Still, telling him to do it for the sake of the class would be even less effective.

For the past few days, me and the rest of the group pooled out wits to try and force Kouenji into action. Beyond the boundaries of school years. And all of them ended in failure.

"Then are you telling us you won't run?".

"That's exactly right".

Looking as though he had given it some thought, Kouenji said that.

"It doesn't seem like I will become an asset to you lot".

After saying that, Kouenji declined.

No longer able to bear it, Ishizaki tried to stand up but Keisei stopped him.

"However, you may relax. I don't intend on doing anything more than is required of me but I will do the bare minimum required. I too, have my own way of doing things".

"In other words.....you'll at least produce average results?".

"That's exactly right. In the first place, when it comes to me, I'll probably end up producing a relatively excellent result even if I'm only doing the bare minimum. Well, this is good news for you lot, isn't it?".

In all likelihood, all nine of us comprehended Kouenji's words. Even if it's only a little, we became conscious of the fact that we're a group and began to look out for one another.

But in practice that's not the case at all. My analysis of Kouenji is that he will only act for his own sake. In all the exams leading up to now, Kouenji repeatedly acted in an unprecedented manner. However, none of those actions could be used to expel Kouenji either.

Kouenji is 99% sure Keisei won't drag him down but there is still the possibility of it happening. Obviously, if he produces bad results then the school will be sure to point that out as well.

And it's also clear that once he's been chosen as the target to be dragged down, there's no longer room for him to escape. This man won't make that sort of mistake.

"What excellent result? Can someone like you who struggles with the likes of Zazen even do something like that?"

"Fu. Fu. Fu. That's because I already mastered mere Zazen as a child. It's No Problem".

"What kind of childhood is that?"

Even after having that pointed out, Kouenji continued laughing pleasantly. Still, this may be good enough for Keisei. Kouenji has no intention of cooperating but he did promise to do the bare minimum.

This is significant in itself. It's precisely because we're classmates that I am aware of just how high Kouenji's potential is.

There are some unknown factors like Zazen and the written exam but I can trust him as far as physical fitness and endurance goes.

One problem's been solved and now it's time for some morning cleaning. When Keisei tried to start cleaning as usual, Ishizaki picked up a dust cloth.

"Take a rest. If doing this means you won't be able to run at the long-distance relay, then that would be far more troublesome".

"No, but---".

"Rest. In exchange, do your best with the written exam. Get at least 120 percent on it, alright?".

"...yeah, 120 percent is impossible but I'll try aiming for a 100 percent.....".

Ishizaki understands what give-and-take is.

Keisei, after thanking him, sat down.

"That's a good attitude, Delinquent-kun".

"Shut it, Kouenji. You haven't done a single thing since the very first day!".

"Is that so? HAHAAHAHAHA".

Kouenji took neither a dust cloth nor a broom in his hand but rather, went for a stroll through nature.

Even when he's drawing attention from the 2nd years and the 3rd years, he's really acting boldly.

"He's a disease. Can you guys even get yourselves promoted to the upper classes with a guy like that in your class?".

Even Class D ended up worrying about us.

"...can't say I have much confidence in that".

Keisei always feels strongly about aiming for the upper classes but it looks like Kouenji is beyond the norm. How Kouenji will act tomorrow is also a big factor. During our morning discussion, we got him to promise us he'd do the bare

minimum but it's not like that's an absolute guarantee. He may not give it his all when he's out of our sight.

If he refuses to do even something like cleaning, then there's an extremely high chance we'll end up in last place. Even the senior students overlooking this now may bare their fangs at us.

Even though I also think Kouenji is the calculating type who wouldn't do something like that, I am still wary of the fact that he's beyond common sense and may betray my expectations.

Perhaps he noticed Keisei's anxiety, Ishizaki went over to him.

"Don't worry about it. We just have to compensate for it".

"That line doesn't suit you. You've become rather mature in just one day".

"Shut it, Hashimoto. You got a problem with that!?".

"No problem. The group's standing will have an impact on my plan as well so I'd like for us to rank as highly as possible. Right, Yahiko?".

"...well, I guess so. Since we're in this troublesome group there's no other choice. If we perform badly, Katsuragi-san will be disappointed in us".

Hashimoto bitterly laughs at Yahiko, whose sole focus is on Katsuragi, and hit him on the shoulder once.

Yahiko too, knows that he will be a liability when it comes to the physical side of things like our marathon training. Despite saying all that, he's been acting rather modestly from the start.

"I've acted against Katsuragi several times on Sakayanagi's orders. I think you'll despise me for that but in this case, we're genuine allies. Please forget the bad blood between us for now".

"Hmm. I wonder about that".

Yahiko didn't raise his voice but he didn't seem to trust Hashimoto all that much. He probably couldn't forgive the fact that Katsuragi had been hindered by his own classmates until now.

"Wasn't it you who made Katsuragi-san the leader this time around too?"

"I had nothing to do with that. That was Matoba's plan".

Yahiko didn't seem convinced even with Hashimoto denying those claims.

Even so, he restrained himself and acted as one member of the whole group. I'd like to praise him in that regard.

2

Our last dinner before the exam tomorrow. I spotted Ichinose walking while carrying a tray and called out to her. It's not like this is an attempt to extract information from her or anything.

But something felt off about Ichinose.

"Are you in any trouble?"

"Ehh? Ayanokouji-kun. No, not really. It's just I was thinking about this and that".

"You're struggling with a difficult problem, aren't you?"

Ichinose was about to leave, but that stopped her.

"The exam's finally taking place tomorrow. What do you think about this exam, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"That's a rather vague question".

"I want you to give me your honest impression".

"It's a little bit tougher than the exams we've had up until now, I guess. I feel like there's a high risk of expulsion".

"I guess that's true.....but we're already in our 3rd semester so isn't it natural that the level of difficulty also increase?".

"Maybe".

"Speaking of risks, there's the 'leader' system and all right? Becoming the leader of a group".

"Yeah".

"Becoming a leader is a very risky thing to do but.....to become the leader for the sake of winning. That's also important, right?".

I didn't deny that and lent my ear to what Ichinose has to say.

"Even if you say there's the risk of expulsion, that's still up in the air and there's no telling. Honestly, there are a lot of unseen factors. But what I'm really scared of is not losing class points or private points. At least that's what I think".

".....you're talking about your classmates?".

"Yeah. The risk of losing a friend is unfathomable".

"If, by any chance, a classmate of yours is about to be expelled, what do you intend on doing then?".

"What I'll do, huh?".

Ichinose slowly lifted her head and laughed thinly.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you really are a smart one".

"Why do you say that?".

"I mean, normally there's nothing you can do if an expulsion occurs, right? But you know that there's an 'after' to that".

"That was just a hypothetical question though.....".

"If it truly were a hypothetical question, you wouldn't have used the word 'intend', would you? 'What will happen?' or in a different sense, asking 'Is your class alright?'".

"Sorry, but you're really overestimating me here. It's just I can express it well".

"Still, I think that's some respectable 'intuition' you've got there".

I said too much, was what she said before she left. Because after all, Ichinose also has things she'd think over on her own. As I bid farewell to Ichinose, other students also called out to her. Being popular must be difficult.

Even if you try to think on your own, the people around you just won't leave you be.

Ichinose usually always has a smile on her face but that just doesn't seem to be the case today.

"Yeah.....sorry, I just don't feel like it today.....".

Ichinose, who is clearly no longer energetic, pretty much ignored two of the girls she's close with and walked off.

"Sorry. I have a couple of things going on right now and I want to be alone for today".

It's also clear that she's not simply acting.

It's almost to the point that you could say she's a completely different person than she was when the training camp first started. I realized after seeing that.

That Sakayanagi has made her move.

The storm that will befall in this special exam might not be limited to just the boys, but also the girls as well.

Since today's the last day before the exam, the situation has also changed significantly. The mood of in the cafeteria itself hasn't changed much from the usual but now there's a clean divide between the laughing ones and the melancholic ones.

In other words, it has become clear which groups were able to make it work and which groups failed to do the same.

As I walked out into the corridor, Kei was there leaning against the wall of the cafeteria.

Casually, as though we were only passing each other by, I received a piece of paper from her. Kei then immediately entered the cafeteria. She'll probably meet up with her friends in there to eat. After Kei and I split up, I looked down at the piece of paper before shredding it into many small pieces and throwing bits of them into the many trash bins installed throughout the school.

She held up pretty well throughout this week but it looks like she's finally at her limit. I left the cafeteria and moved towards a certain corner of the school building.

Because the person I had Kei keep an eye on is now wandering around in hopes of getting some alone time.

And alone time in this training camp is hard to come by. There's midnight but if she goes missing for a long time from her shared room, others would notice. In that case, the ideal option would be to use this time when everyone else gathers at the cafeteria.

As I walked in the direction that person went, I saw her crouching down as though concealing herself.

She didn't notice me there as she continued crying while muffling herself. And for a moment, I hesitated. However, no matter how hard this place is for people to stumble upon, there's no telling when another student might come across

this place.

In that case, I should wrap this up quickly.

"If you're in trouble you should be consulting Horikita.....the former student council president, shouldn't you?".

"!?".

The girl who raised her face was Tachibana Akane from Class A of the 3rd years. Panicking over having shown me that pathetic figure of hers, she wipes her tears away.

"What do you want?".

"It's not about what I want, it's about what I just told you".

"It's not like I'm in any trouble or anything".

"If you're crying without a reason then that in itself is a problem".

"I'm not crying!".

Saying that, Tachibana averted her eyes from me. The reason she's not moving from that place is that if she goes somewhere brightly lit, her reddened eyes and the traces of tears on her face would become clearly visible.

"Sometimes I just want to be alone".

"We certainly don't get much private time to ourselves, do we?".

A toilet break's about the only time for that but even then, it's abnormal to use it for long periods of time. There would also be more than a few students seeing you go in and out.

"For the record, I'm also on President Horikita's side".

That's a lie. But if I say that, Tachibana will probably trust me more.

"Still, you wouldn't be of any help".

Well.....if she's going with that then I don't really have a reply. On the contrary, we'd just be risking the leak of information.

"Please just count yourself lucky that we didn't end up as enemies".

"Please stop talking so casually to your seniors. I didn't say anything until now because Horikita-kun was also there but.....".

More importantly, I became curious about how she usually refers to him as 'Horikita-kun'. It's also strange how she continues to refer to him as 'President Horikita' despite him having left that post.

She could call him the 'former' one too but the way Tachibana refers to him is unnatural.

"You.....it must be good being a 1st year. So optimistic".

"That's a rather fearful statement. Are you anxious about the exam coming tomorrow?"

"I don't really feel anything in particular. There's the leader and all but it's not like there's bad blood within our group or anything. On the contrary, things are going swimmingly".

"Then why are you crying here?"

"I'm telling you, I wasn't crying".

When I pointed at Tachibana's eyes, she panicked and used her hand to check whether or not her eyes were still wet. After realizing they were dry, she turned to glare at me with a slightly angry expression.

"Horikita-kun's the one I'm anxious.....worried about".

It's a lie that's not quite a lie. I'm not going to go there yet.

"Worry, huh? Is there anything to worry about when it comes to that man?"

"Horikita-kun.....Horikita-kun's always been fighting alone. Until now, he's

been fighting against the 2nd years and also the 3rd years. You couldn't possibly understand what it must be like to fight against everyone all on your own and how difficult it must be".

Even if I tried to understand, there's no way I'd understand.

"I do know a bit about how Nagumo and the 2nd years led by him are the enemy but I didn't know there were enemies among the 3rd years too. There can't possibly be that many people rebelling against the man who assumed the role of student council president, right?".

"Aren't you misconstruing Horikita-kun as some kind of dictator? Even though he was the student council president, he didn't abuse his authority unlike Nagumo-kun. Because there's no room to be lax in any exam".

Even if she says all that, I never had the opportunity to familiarize myself with the 3rd years' internal affairs much less have a clue about the older Horikita's background.

But by saying there's no room to be lax in any exam means.....

"Could it be that the class conflict between the 3rd years is still going on?".

"At the very least.....if Horikita-kun falls, Class A will definitely go too".

"Heh.....".

That's certainly also what Nagumo's been saying. That the gap between the 3rd years' Class A and Class B is only 312. It's definitely possible if the older Horikita is their only strength or if Class B possesses talented students of their own.

"So that means even he's just a normal student in the end, huh?".

"Horikita-kun is-----!.....it's nothing".

She stops herself as though trying to hold herself back from raising her voice.

But as though spitting out her frustrations, she slowly continued.

"Because the other Class A students were always a liability.....we lost a lot of class points we shouldn't have lost and even our private points---he's always sacrificed himself for the sake of protecting his comrades".

If what Tachibana says is true then that means the older Horikita is the Hirata type. To be honest, it doesn't seem that way to me. Of course, that's what the one actually part of the 3rd years' Class A, Tachibana, is saying so there must be a degree of truth to it. In all likelihood, there were probably many instances where he dealt with matters behind the scenes without revealing his virtuousness.

The person who's seen those things happen more than anyone else from beside him is this girl here.

"In other words, you're feeling down because of the current situation?".

"Even I am aware of the boys' situation. The fact that Nagumo-kun challenged Horikita-kun and that he's unable to make a move because of that. And also, that we are unable to do anything to help him".

"Whether or not you can help him also depends on your tenacity, right?".

"I know that".

Perhaps tears welled up again in her eyes, Tachibana once again wiped them away with her arm.

Her thoughts about the older Horikita may be the reason for those tears but there are other reasons as well.

"You're in some sort of trouble, aren't you?".

"...no. Not really".

She denied it.

"Is that really true?".

"You're persistent, aren't you? I'm not in trouble or anything".

"If---no, if you say that then I must have misunderstood".

"Yes, you misunderstood. Please don't say anything weird to Horikita-kun".

"Sure".

After warning me harshly, Tachibana went back towards the cafeteria. On the off chance, she probably doesn't want the older Horikita to know the truth I suppose.

But you're making a mistake, Tachibana. This isn't a problem you can solve by sacrificing yourself.

"I suppose this means it's going to be checkmate unless I make a move".

After seeing Tachibana's fragile back, I confirmed that to myself.

4

Midnight. I woke upon hearing a slight creaking coming from the bed. A lone student is moving in the dark. Of course, even if there's absolutely zero visibility I'd still know who it is.

It's Hashimoto who's supposed to be sound asleep above me. He soundlessly descended using the bunk bed's ladder and without even bringing along a flashlight, he left the room.

After that, I slowly raised myself up.

I think it's most likely going to be a toilet break but there are other possibilities too. Because I noticed the fact that throughout this whole week, there hasn't been a single incident of Hashimoto going for a toilet break in the middle of the night.

I only gave him a slight headstart before getting up and following Hashimoto.

On the off chance that he's standing right outside the door and notices me, I can just say that I'm also going for a toilet break.

It's precisely because we share the same bed that Hashimoto will also think that he just woke me up too. I concealed my presence and headed out into the corridor.

There's only the emergency light and the moonlight streaming in from outside but walking without a flashlight is possible. I saw Hashimoto heading off towards the toilet.

I followed him. And when I did, Hashimoto turned left rather than continue on down the corridor. It doesn't look like he's simply heading to the toilet. Hashimoto, after going down to the first floor, went outside while still in his indoor shoes. As I approached him, I concealed myself using the wall on my side. There's no one other than Hashimoto there. Maybe he just came here for a breath of fresh air prior to the exam?

Or perhaps he's waiting for someone? I realized the answer to that question right away.

Sensing that he's about to turn towards me, I moved elsewhere. Because I saw another shadow I believe to be his objective here. That shadow walked along the path Hashimoto took and went outside.

In a situation like this where not even the sounds of insects are present, you could hear a person's voice a lot more clearly than you'd expect.

"Yo, Ryuen".

"What the hell do you want with me?"

"I just want to have a chat with you. You stand out way too much in the cafeteria. The only time we can meet would be in the middle of the night, right?"

"On the very last day?"

"Precisely because it's the very last day. Everyone else should be sound asleep right now".

"...I see. I guess that's true".

There are no students who'd stay up this late at night when there's an exam the next day. That's why Hashimoto chose a time like this to have his secret meeting with Ryuen.

But Ryuen and Hashimoto are a rather unexpected combination.....or not I suppose. Back during our time on the uninhabited island, Ryuen cultivated a relationship with Class A.

It wouldn't be strange even if Hashimoto played the role of the mediator back then.

"Doing things in a roundabout way isn't how I roll. Give it to me straight. Did you really step down as class leader?"

"Kuku. You don't seem like you're buying it?"

"At the very least I can't bring myself to believe you got beaten down by Ishizaki and the others".

Hashimoto tells him how that point stood out to him. Certainly, being beaten by Ishizaki does sound rather stupid.

"Putting him aside, Albert's a troublesome one. If I go head-to-head with that guy, it'll be tough".

"I see. Well, Albert certainly is a threat I suppose. But the Ryuen Kakeru that I know would never cower before an enemy like that. On the contrary, he'd always have a countermeasure planned, right?"

Rather than assuaging his doubts, that only seemed to make him even more suspicious.

"I just got tired of leading a bunch of people who'd rebel against me. As long as I keep exploiting you Class A guys, I'll always be in the safe zone. I'm not obligated to save those guys".

"I see. So that's the truth then".

"Have I convinced you?".

"I wonder. To be honest, it's still fifty-fifty. Besides, I'd personally like you to fight back from the situation you're in right now".

"So you can get more pocket money, is that it?".

"That's exactly right. Just like you, I desire the 'promise of Class A'".

If you can save up 20 million points, you gain the right to move up to Class A. Any student who possesses the means to do so can rest assured. A situation that would be the envy of everyone else.

But making that a reality is difficult. Apparently, Hashimoto's also one of the students aiming for that.

"I assume you're prepared to betray Sakayanagi if the promise of victory is what you want".

"If necessary, yes".

Hashimoto answered like that but immediately added this.

"Selling out Sakayanagi doesn't come cheap, Ryuen. Because right now, Sakayanagi stands at the very top of our class. I'm on the winning team, you get it right?".

"I'd like to see how long this sort of diplomacy will work".

"I'm rather good at carving out my own place. I'll have you know I'm more capable than I seem. But I'm glad I got to talk directly with you like this. Your eyes aren't dead yet".

After yawning, Hashimoto finally added this.

"When Hirata's class overtook yours, I wondered what the hell you were doing but you may be tougher than you look".

"Huh?".

"If you look at each member calmly, everything becomes clear. And you start wanting to crush them early on".

"To think you'd evaluate them. Is there a man you're interested in or something?".

"At the very least, Kouenji's a threat. If he acts for the sake of the class, there's no telling what'll happen even to Class A. Besides, there are students like Hirata and Yukimura who excel academically. There's also Sudou, who's one of the physically fittest in our school year".

"I don't know about the others but I don't think that man will act".

Hashimoto laughed, then agreed with him.

"Regardless, there's no telling what'll happen when. But I'll keep that in mind, just in case. Even if Hirata and his class manage to get themselves promoted to Class A, there's no problem as long as there's room for me to squeeze myself in".

"I doubt you have that much power to begin with but do your best to make sure you don't get burned, ok?".

Ryuuen mocks Hashimoto and tries to cut the conversation short.

"Even if it's shitty, dragging this out is just troublesome".

"Yeah".

I anticipated that they'd cut their conversation short and so I tried to move

elsewhere. Hashimoto will probably head back to our room right away. It would be suspicious unless I'm already sound asleep in bed by then.

But then I sensed someone else approaching and stopped myself from heading back. That person immediately noticed Ryuuen and Hashimoto and called out to them.

"Hey 1st years, having a secret meeting at a time like this?"

"Huh?"

The ones who stood before Ryuuen and Hashimoto who both headed back into the school building are Nagumo Miyabi and Horikita Manabu. Ryuuen stopped walking for an instant but then immediately lost interest and started walking again.

Towards Nagumo. But Nagumo did not move from that spot.

"Get out of my way".

In response to Ryuuen's glare, Nagumo laughed as though that fascinated him.

Hashimoto too, having returned to the corridor to see what's going on, met Nagumo's gaze.

"I've heard you're quite the delinquent. You're Ryuuen, right? I'm going to have a little chat with Horikita-senpai now but you should tag along too".

You too, as though saying that he spoke to Hashimoto too.

"Not interested".

Ryuuen shoulder checked Nagumo.

"Bullish, aren't you? Aren't you afraid of me, Ryuuen?"

"Student council president or whatever else you might be, I'll crush anyone who gets in my way".

"Heh".

Nagumo seems to now harbor a certain degree of interest in Ryuen, who didn't budge an inch.

"I don't really dislike your type. But you're not cut out to be part of my student council".

When Ryuen tried to walk away, Nagumo again called out to him.

"As a third party, why don't you make a bet? In today's special exam, between my group and Horikita-senpai's group, which one do you think will rank higher? 10,000 points per bet. How about that? No matter which side you bet on, as long as you hit the mark I'll pay up that amount. If it's a miss I'll have you pay up though".

"That's stupid. I'm not interested in that sort of money".

"10,000 is 'that sort of money' for you, huh? You're Class D so you're always short on money, aren't you? You could earn a bit more, you know?".

"Then go with 1 million. I'll bite if you're willing to pay up that much".

Ryuen said that and turned around.

"Hahaha. You're a funny one, Ryuen. A bold joke. You can go now".

Apparently he thinks Ryuen's proposal was a joke.

"If you don't have the balls to pay up at least that much, don't bother asking me to place a bet".

"Hey you, that 1st year over there. You think Ryuen can pay up?".

Nagumo asks Hashimoto.

Hashimoto, who's aware of the secret arrangement he made with Class A, should know that he's definitely capable of doing so but---

"I'm not sure...we're in different classes so I can't tell".

"If we had our phones and could check then I wouldn't mind playing along. Too bad".

In the end, the bet was called off. And with that timing, Hashimoto tried to leave. Perhaps because they were already out of his sight, Nagumo turned away from them and glanced at the older Horikita.

"Horikita-senpai, please excuse yourself from the exam tomorrow".

All of a sudden, he cut in with those words.

Ryuuen disinterestedly walked off but Hashimoto unexpectedly stopped walking.

"Excuse myself?".

"That's right".

"This is even worse than the joke Ryuuen told just now".

"I'm actually quite serious about this".

But he added this.

"I'm saying this for your sake, senpai".

"Just put it simply. I know you have a habit of monologuing in your own head but looks like you weren't able to fix that habit".

"Sorry. Being able to see the future far too clearly is also something to consider. If you won't excuse yourself, senpai, you will come to regret it. In other words, I'm showing you mercy right now. I could drop you without any warning but that would be far too cruel, wouldn't it?".

"What are you planning? Depending on what it is, I won't accept it".

"I understand. That the rules of our fight are to do it fair-and-square without getting a third party involved. But with the exam going the way it is, there's no telling which one of us has won until we open the lid to check. Of course, I

expect it to be a close battle so I'd like to win. For that reason, I've done something".

"Does that have anything to do with you asking me to excuse myself?".

"Because by doing so, you would be minimizing the damage you'll be sustaining, senpai. Can you see what preparations I've made? No, you can't. There isn't a single student in this school capable of reading my train of thought. That's just how it is. Even your favorite's the same...which 1st year was it again?".

Nagumo looked around and deliberately locked his gaze on Hashimoto. But there's no way Hashimoto could possibly understand.

"Yeah, that's right. If I recall, he's in the same group as this 1st year here. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, right?".

As though to make Hashimoto aware of it, Nagumo clearly emphasized my name.

"What do you think, Hashimoto? About Ayanokouji".

"What do you.....no, I think he's just a normal student.....".

Hashimoto is bewildered after having unexpectedly heard my name.

"Right? But Horikita-senpai here seems to rank Ayanokouji above all the other 1st years".

"Isn't that because he gave a good showing during the sports festival's relay?".

"Normally speaking, yes. But that doesn't seem to be all there is to it. Horikita-senpai places Ayanokouji above even Sakayanagi, above even Ryuen and above even Ichinose. Since you're in the same group, I thought you might've been able to sense something".

"No.....".

"Why exactly is that, senpai. Please tell us the reason already".

"You're stretching the point, Nagumo. When did I ever tell you my opinion of Ayanokouji? There's nothing to be gained in distorting the truth. Stop teasing the 1st years already".

"Sorry, senpai. I guess you're right. Sorry, Hashimoto. That was a joke just now".

"Is that so.....?".

The topic of their discussion is slightly worrying but I decided to wrap it up. The three of them happen to be blocking the corridor so I'll have to use the staircase on the opposite end to return to our room. It would mean taking a detour but I decided to back via an alternative route. If I'm not there by the time Hashimoto gets back, it might raise suspicions.

A few minutes after I got back, Hashimoto quietly returned to the room. In the dark, I felt a gaze being directed at me, but that was it. Afterwards, Hashimoto silently went to sleep.

Chapter 7: Second half of the girls' battle - Horikita Suzune

Tomorrow the actual exam will take place.

Normally right now, the students should be having a lip-smacking dinner.

I, Horikita Suzune, made contact with the person inside our shared room.

Since all the students should be at the cafeteria at this time, it was quite simple to get us alone together.

"You see, Horikita-san. To be honest with you, I don't think you're seeing the current situation".

Before my eyes, Kushida-san looks back at me with a serious look. Still, right now we're at a cramped outdoor school.

I don't know who's got eyes and ears where. At the very least I cannot afford to take my eyes off Kushida-san, whose right before my eyes in her public persona.

"I'm not seeing the current situation. What exactly do you mean by that?".

"In order to keep an eye on me.....or alternatively, to have me acknowledge you as a comrade by forcibly dragging me into the same group. Right?".

Always assuming that there's someone coming, Kushida-san replied to me with an attitude that's not far off from her usual one.

But there's a strength behind that manner of speech.

It must surely be because this isn't a situation where using tricks such as recording it with a cell phone isn't possible.

But that is also a welcome relief for me.

If she keeps hiding her true nature, we'll never get anywhere.

"I won't deny that those objectives are part of the reason".

'Part' is the word I emphasized but Kushida-san didn't seem to care about that.

"You seem to be acting based on personal feelings but I'm just wondering how that'll pan out into a strategy. Certainly Horikita-san and I don't get along. But as for the group's scores.....no, if you had been thinking about the class, shouldn't you have put aside your personal feelings?"

Kushida-san said so as she sighed and crossed her arms, declaring the righteousness of her words.

"Your priority is me and me alone, that's why victory or defeat is a secondary concern for you. Am I wrong?"

"That's right. I can't deny that either".

"So you admit it".

As a matter of fact, I have nothing to deny it with.

Ever since it was decided that the Paper Shuffle would be occurring, I have been taking action while thinking solely about Kushida-san.

That's also the case when I invited her out for tea during the winter vacation.

I'm doing things I've never done before in my entire life until now.

"It doesn't matter what you do. I'd like you to get it through your head already".

"Unfortunately, that's an impossible request".

Until I have resolved the problem with Kushida-san, I won't be able to move forward.

"It's not my place to say but have you forgotten the promise made in front of the student council president you forcibly dragged me in front of? Leaving aside my feelings, which just won't settle down, I've given my word that I won't sabotage Horikita-san anymore. I had thought you'd at least understand I wouldn't take action carelessly. Or could it be that you thought I'd immediately break my promise?"

I couldn't answer that question with words. In all likelihood, Kushida-san knows of my feelings as well. Half of it would be correct.

Even as I held hopes that Kushida-san is the sort of person to reluctantly abide by her promise, there's still a side of me that thinks she may be moving behind the scenes to expel me, and those two feelings are intertwined.

If I did not suspect Kushida-san, then there'd be no need for me to stick with her all day and all night.

Besides, Nii-san isn't the sort of person to reveal it to others so as soon as he graduates, the promise is as good as null.

If I am to take action, it has to be before Nii-san is gone after his graduation. There's little time left.

"I want to be trusted by you".

I decided to be frank with her.

"You're being quite honest".

Taking it head-on, Kushida-san smiled thinly. But it was not an affirmative smile. This alone, I cannot afford to mistake.

"No matter what happens, I will not reveal your past. What should I do to have you believe me?"

"Sorry but I'll never believe you".

Kushida-san said so readily.

"I don't stand to gain anything from revealing it".

"That may be so. If I ever find out you told someone about it, I'll give you no quarter. I may even think about collapsing the class like I did back during middle school. Someone like you, Horikita-san, who's aiming for Class A won't commit an act that's full of nothing but drawbacks. It's natural to think that way".

It seemed to me that my feelings were conveyed as they are to Kushida-san.

But even so, there must be a reason why she still cannot relent.

"But you see, if you ask me I'd say our current circumstances are quite inflexible".

"Inflexible.....?".

"For instance, you have a knife pointed at the back of your head and you're asked to cooperate because you won't be hurt that way, will you obey another person then? There's a difference between a situation where you can't be hurt even if they wanted to hurt you and a situation where they can easily hurt you if they feel like doing so. You understand, right?".

Kushida-san trusts no one.

She doesn't make her decisions based on the pros and cons but rather, she simply can't stand the fact that someone other than herself may possess information that gives them an advantage.

So that's why she's trying to get rid of me. The problem is that I can't let go of that knife either.

"But aren't you strangling yourself over that? As a matter of fact, the number of people who know about you is slowly increasing".

"That's right. I'll admit that the situation has become difficult".

"You're clever. You're above average when it comes to academic ability and athleticism and you're number one in our school year when it comes to communication skills.....no, depending on the situation you may even be number one in the whole school. Even as I'm talking to you like this now, I'm impressed by how well you're able to think on your feet. You would be a great asset to the class if you would cooperate as a classmate. You yourself would be better appreciated by your surroundings that way too".

"Don't you know that know-it-all tone of yours pisses me off more than anything else? This proposal of yours stems from you knowing about my true personality. I can't stand that. If you were a person who didn't know anything, you wouldn't even be taking that tone with me".

"That's.....".

I will never accept someone who knows about my past. That resolve of hers has been intensely conveyed to me.

"You're smarter than me, wouldn't you do just fine at any other school? Besides, as far as I can tell, Horikita-san came here because you wanted to attend the same school as your brother right? But your brother will be graduating soon, so wouldn't you no longer need to force yourself to stay here? Go study at a different school and either go onto college or find yourself a job. Isn't that fine?".

As though saying any further conversation would be a waste of time, Kushida-san showed signs of cutting our conversation short. I was unable to keep her in check and so I quietly sighed.

"I'll lie low for now. But I will never trust you nor will I cooperate with you,

Horikita-san. Until either one of us disappears from this school, this conversation will run forever in parallel. It'll do you good to remember that".

"...I understand. I'll leave it at this for today then".

"Not just today, make this the last time".

Leaving behind those words, Kushida-san walked off through the corridor.

"I'm powerless".

I don't have that many comrades I can rely on.

Ayanokouji-kun seems like the person I can rely on the most at a time like this but we've grown distant.

It may have been because I forced him to say his piece about the student council in front of Kushida-san.

But there are things I can't back down from either.

My conflict with her is something that can only be resolved through repeatedly making contact with her.

Even if I am to lose his cooperation, I will still choose Kushida-san.

No, I have to choose her.

Epilogue: Blind spot

The last day of the training camp. In other words, the day has come for our groups to be ranked in this special exam. One week has gone by and in that time, both boys and girls from across all school years making up roughly 36 small groups have gone about their own business. There are groups where members have successfully managed to deepen the relationships between one another and there are also groups that are on the brink of collapse.

There are also groups where members indifferently did what needed doing without bothering to deepen relations between each other. At first, nobody in our group thought we'd see eye to eye. However, in the end we did manage to grow closer to one another, significantly bridging the distance that existed between us. Not perfectly, of course.

At best, it's a makeshift group. Tomorrow, we'll be enemies again. We were only temporarily allied. However, there's still a certain sense of loneliness when you remember that our activities together as a group is at an end.

"We've done what needed doing for now. No matter what the outcome is, this group has no regrets".

"I think so too. Thank you for being our leader for a week, Yukimura".

Ishizaki and Keisei, both of their own volition, extended their hands and exchanged a light handshake.

"No matter what the outcome is, let's do our best".

"I'll be counting on you".

The others are also complimenting each other and exchanging handshakes. Afterwards, we headed to the classroom our group was assigned to. There's nothing to criticize as far as our unity goes too. Our biggest concern right now is

how Kouenji will act.

He's currently calmly following us. But there's no telling when we'll lose control of him.

The 2nd and 3rd years from our group are already here and so we panickedly took our seats. After that, the bell rang and a teacher came in simultaneously to begin explaining the contents of the exam to us.

Even though we're a large group made up of all school years, the exam itself will be held based on the small groups or our school year.

At best, the large groups will only contribute to our overall ranking. No matter how spacious the outdoor school may be, if we're all doing the same thing simultaneously then it won't be enough.

As expected, there are four topics covered by the exam and nothing out of the blue.

'Zen'. 'Speech'. 'Long-distance relay'. 'Written exam'. These are the four assessments that will be held. We 1st years will start with Zazen. And then we'll move onto the written exam. Then the long-distance relay and finally we'll be giving our speeches.

On the contrary, the 2nd years have a harder start by having the long-distance relay come first. The 3rd years seem to be starting with their speeches.

After breakfast, we headed over to the Zazen dojo. We are exempt from cleaning this morning since the exam will be starting right off the bat. All the 1st year boys are gathered here.

"Now then, let's start the Zazen assessment. Scoring is based on two criteria.

Your actions and manners after entering this dojo and any semblance of unrest during Zazen itself. After Zazen, stand by in your assigned classrooms until you are given instructions for the next assessment. I'll call each student out by name and we'll go in that order. Line up and we'll start the assessment in that order. I'll start now. Class A, Katsuragi Kouhei. Class D, Ishizaki Daichi---".

The teacher continues to read out the names. After Katsuragi came Ishizaki, an unexpected order. Chatters came from the students around us.

"Hurry up, Ishizaki. Next. 1st year Class B, Beppu Ryouta".

Bewildered, Ishizaki panickedly heads over to queue up.

"So we're not going by the usual order.....".

Keisei panicked and quickly prepared himself. I'll admit this is not what we had imagined. We've performed Zazen over and over throughout this week but we all did so in our own small groups.

We sat next to a group member of our choosing back then but this time around, it looks like the school is randomly allocating us. We'll have to sit next to students who aren't in our comfort zone.

That may seem trivial but right now, when confronted with it out of the blue, that only adds to the list of hurdles. The school's attempt to shake us up had an effect on a portion of the students right away.

A large hand rests itself on the agitated Keisei's shoulder. It's Albert's hand. Having received that concerned warning to keep himself calm, it appears Keisei managed to regain some of his calmness.

"Sorry. If I'm like this on the very first assessment, it'd have an impact on the group's morale".

Keisei didn't think of a leader's burden as being a negative point, but rather a positive one. Afterwards, Keisei's name is called out and he obediently headed into the dojo.

Ultimately, from our group I was called before Albert as second from last. Many teachers stood around inside the dojo holding boards and pens. Furthermore, perhaps to make absolutely certain, there's almost a disproportionate amount of cameras set up inside the dojo.

I've already got the basics of Zazen down in my head so I won't slip up.

Since the scoring system is mostly based on giving out demerits, I'll first make sure to get a perfect score. I've already concluded that there's no reason to hold back in Zazen and so I decided that I'll definitely be getting a perfect score here.

A slight distance away, Kouenji is also performing Zazen. There's not a single mistake to be found in his posture. A truly beautiful posture. He continued to display that perfect, faultless posture.

This man was never once serious during training but I suppose that's to be expected.

We keep our eyes closed during the actual assessment so I wasn't able to see the details but it appears he'll be able to pull it off without any problems.

2

After Zazen, everyone starts leaving the room without making any small talk. Of course, we're probably still being assessed until we're outside the dojo itself. While being watched by the teachers, students leave the room and head over to their assigned classrooms as instructed.

Once everyone in our group assembled in the classroom, Keisei sat down as though in relief.

"Leg felt numb through the whole thing.....".

"Did you manage to endure it?".

Maybe Ishizaki's the same too because while rubbing his leg, he asked Keisei.

"Somehow. But maybe I got a few demerits".

"Well, no use crying over spilt milk. Nothing you can do now that it's over. You think so too, right Ayanokouji?".

Saying that, Hashimoto looked at me.

"That's right. Next up is the written exam, Keisei's specialty. It'll be better to focus on that instead".

What he heard from Nagumo last night must still be on Hashimoto's mind. But that doesn't mean he's just going to directly ask me about it or anything.

Because Hashimoto doesn't even know what part of me the older Horikita considers special in the first place.

Aside from us, two more 1st year small groups linked up. One of them is the group led by Akito that Ryuen is a member of. I could tell Ishizaki and Albert turning to look at Ryuen.

But rather than look at us, Ryuen simply took a seat alone. Not talking to anyone else. Alone. He's part of the group but at the same time, he isn't. He's giving off the feeling of being completely isolated.

"That's just strange, isn't it?".

Beside me, Hashimoto whispers as though talking to himself. It would be so easy to just ignore him but I suppose I'll humor him a bit.

"What is?".

"I'm talking about Ishizaki and Albert's eyes. They're looking at someone they hate but I just don't feel that from them. It's almost like they're pets thrown away by their master, looking at him with sorrowful eyes".

"I don't quite understand. Didn't Ishizaki and the others start the fight after being fed up with the tyranny?".

"That's true but.....just maybe, there's something else behind Ryuen's fall?".

Hashimoto doesn't have a single shred of evidence linking me to Ryuen. However, taking into consideration Nagumo's interest in Ryuen, it's not strange that his thoughts would forcibly lead him there.

"Don't know.....I'm not familiar with the affairs of other classes".

"I see. Sorry about bringing up a strange topic".

Not too long afterwards, after the 10 minute break ended, we moved onto the written portion of the exam. There's nothing particularly noteworthy about it. The things we learned during the training camp are the things we are tested on.

As long as I get the essentials down, I could definitely get a perfect score but for a struggling student, 50~70 percent would be about right. I wonder what I should do.....

While everyone else is giving it their all in this exam, I tried to figure out just how many points I should lose. I don't think they'll announce individual results but it's not very desirable to keep letting the school see me get perfect scores either. There are already far too many students trying to sound me out recently. I'm not lying when I say I want to hold myself back from getting a high score.

And then I reached a conclusion.

I decided to deliberately get a question that seems difficult wrong. This means it'll be difficult for me to get any higher than 95 percent. After I finished writing down all the exams, I felt like looking out the window. But it would be troublesome if they think I'm cheating so I chose to silently close my eyes and wait for the end.

After the test is over, the groups once again assembled and we score ourselves. Well, it's not like anything will change just because we have to score ourselves but I cannot help but wonder whether I got that question right or wrong.

I suppose changing your thoughts does help to a certain degree. We're missing one person though since Kouenji left the classroom as soon as the test ended. As usual, Ishizaki seems to have missed out on many questions. Looks like I was right to insure against it.

Still, the written exam itself was rather easy overall so every group should have scored highly. And from what I could see of the other students back at the dojo, there isn't a significant gap forming in both 'Zazen' and the 'Written exam' portions. Everyone seemed to be performing Zazen relatively well.

Since both the 'Speech' and 'Zazen' portions involve simply regurgitating what we've already learned, it's unlikely to give rise to any differences in points as long as they're properly done. That means the 'Long-distance relay' portion will have the most influence on the group rankings in this exam.

If the scores directly translate to the rankings then the top group would have to have 100 percent but.....number one=100 percent might be too straightforward. Our times will also have an impact.

For instance, you'll still be able to gain additional points even if you're in sixth place so long as your time's good.

It all depends on how fast you finish and how high a rank you get. When I went outside, I spotted many vans parked. Looks like they'll be using these vans to take each student to where they're supposed to receive the baton.

We received instructions from the staff to get into the vans. The minimum requirement for each student is to run at least more than 1.2 kilometers.

The baton may be passed to another student every 1.2 kilometers. If due to an accident, the student becomes unable to continue running or is otherwise unable to fulfill the minimum requirements, they will be disqualified.

After carefully informing us of those three things, they dropped off Keisei who would be first to run and then we left.

That's because our plan is to have the unathletic students run first. Keisei would go first and then next up would be Class B's Sumida, Tokitou and then Moriyama. Yahiko is fifth up.

That's because the opening phase won't have too many ups and downs plus there's not much pressure on you to not be overtaken. These five will run the minimum length of 1.2 kilometers each. 6 kilometers in total. And then the baton will pass to Hashimoto and we'll have him give it his all in running 3.6 kilometers including the turnaround point. Then Albert will take the baton and run 1.2 kilometers before passing it to Ishizaki, who will then run 3.6 kilometers. I would've been fine with taking over after Albert but Keisei insisted that linking up with a fellow classmate would make the transition go smoother. Kouenji will only be running 1.2 kilometers and so I'll pass the baton over to him last after running 2.4 kilometers myself.

That's the conclusion Keisei ultimately reached. The reason he placed Kouenji last is to tempt him into the mood by baiting him with the goal plus to assuage any anxiety about him not carrying the baton.

In the case that he holds back, we may be hit with a demerit if they're unable to determine who ran slowly. Ishizaki then got off the van and now there's only me, the teacher driving the van and Kouenji left.

Since there's the turnaround point to consider, it wouldn't have been strange for them to drop us off first but it looks like they're dropping us off in the exact order in which we're running.

All that's left now is for me to stand by 3.6 kilometers away from the goal. The van starts moving back in the direction we came from.

"Ayanokouji Boy, let me ask you this directly. If we get 1st place in the long-distance relay, what will the result be overall?"

"...there's no way I'd know that even if you ask me. In the first place, the results of the exam will depend on the average score of our large group. It all hinges on how well our seniors can perform, right?"

No matter how hard we try, if the rest of them aren't carrying their weight then it'll be difficult for us to secure first place.

"So you won't say there's a possibility of us being in first place, even as a lie?"

"You're not the type of man I could cheer up by saying that, right?"

"I wonder about that. How about giving me 1.2 kilometers of your distance? If I run with everything I've got then there's a very high chance the rest of the group will win".

After getting up, Kouenji whispered that into my ear.

"What's gotten into you?"

"Just a whim. I'm saying that this whim of mine may help you out. Not a bad deal, right?"

"In other words, you're saying you'll take responsibility for 2.4 kilometers and give us results?"

"No need to be so formal. It's just a whim of mine after all".

"I see. Sorry but I refuse. I don't intend to just up and change Keisei's strategy on my own".

"Fu. Fu. Fu. Really? That's unfortunate".

Kouenji said that and then returned to his seat.

I don't know what he's up to but I have no intention of taking any risks. If he's helping us on a whim then that means he could hold back during the run itself on another whim. The only thing Kouenji's promised to do is to run the minimum distance required.

In other words, he may hold back once he's running the extra 1.2 kilometers. The proof lies in how he brushed me aside when I asked whether or not he'd take responsibility.

Besides, if some sort of trouble occurs because of a call I made then that may draw attention to me.

"It looks like you're sharper than I thought. But at the same time, you're also a boring man".

If this evaluation of me leads him to treat me the same way he treats the other students, then that's something to be grateful for. I got off the van and waited 3.6 kilometers away from the goal for Ishizaki.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun".

Of course, there are also other boys at this spot and Hirata's the one who called my name.

"You're not the anchor?".

"Yeah. Kouenji will take over after me. What about you? Going with Sudou?".

"Yeah. After all, he looks like he's itching to run. But with 15 people, things don't always go your way".

Currently, for the last 1.2 kilometers, Sudou's rivalry with Kouenji is probably reaching its peak.

"I personally would've preferred having more people. It would've been a little easier".

"Anyways, let's do our best. Because as long as we're over the borderline, no one will get expelled".

"Yeah".

While we're waiting, everyone's free to either chat or remain silent. Since water supply points are located every 1.2 kilometers, it's also possible to go and grab a drink.

Well, if you guzzle water before running you run the risk of getting a stomach ache though.....A single student, completely ignoring those concerns of mine, guzzled water from a bottle.

"Ahh---I'm getting nervous...".

That student whispered before turning around and locking eyes with me. It's the Professor.

He approached me. Maybe he wants someone to talk to.

"So you're in this position too, Ayanokouji-kun".

"A-Ayanokouji-kun? In this position....?".

I couldn't believe my ears at the way the Professor's talking. The usual Professor would've gone with 'Ayanokouji-dono~ You have been stationed at this location too~' or something like that.

"Ahh...no, I stopped speaking like that. I was doing it to imitate a character in the first place but after they warned me during Zazen, I thought I'd just quit doing it".

"I-I see".

I couldn't hide my surprise at the Professor's ill-suited normal speech. It's like he's lost his individuality. He's giving me the impression of a Student A.

Afterwards, I had a normal back-and-forth conversation with the Professor but to be honest, I can hardly recall any of it. Just changing your manner of speech can change a lot of things so there's no telling.

Anyways, I wonder if Keisei's successfully passed the baton. No matter how long it takes, the important thing is to stay in the race.

This may not sound nice but even if our large group comes in dead last and our group falls below the borderline there's still absolutely no chance of any harm coming my way.

But I do genuinely think it would be best if no one gets expelled. I wonder how many minutes have passed but finally, I could see a student coming over. But he turned out to be from Kanzaki's group rather than Ishizaki.

One by one, students continued to arrive after that. Ishizaki came in fourth after a close struggle against the runner in third place.

"Hah, haaah. Take it, Ayanokouji! Get 1st place!".

He screamed and handed the baton over to me. Whether or not we can take the lead depends on Kouenji but I just quietly accepted it and started running.

"I'll kill you if you hold back!".

After handing me the baton, Ishizaki screamed that to me with the last of his strength before collapsing. I suppose it's natural given that he just ran over 3 kilometers through mountainous terrain.

I decided to slowly bridge the gap between me and the ones in front by running faster than the people around me while not letting it affect my breathing. Rather than me attacking them by going at a fast pace, I allowed their stamina to fail them before overtaking them. By doing so, it's easier to fool them into thinking they were overtaken because they were slow.

Despite the ups and downs, a distance of about 2 kilometers isn't enough to make me pant. And just like that, I ended up overtaking one runner and ended up coming in third, not too far off from second place. Then I handed the baton over to Kouenji.

The baton that passed through nine hands before reaching this point. Its fate now depends on the man before me.

"Now then, let's work up a little sweat".

Brushing back his hair, Kouenji accepted the baton and started running with an innocent look on his face. He's probably not doing his best but he's more than fast enough.

If it's like this then it should be fine. Of course, that is only if he doesn't just started walking once he's out of our sight. Afterwards, despite making us worry, Kouenji successfully reached the goal and ranked second.

I don't know whether he couldn't keep up with the runner in first place or simply didn't bother to. Probably the latter.

The speech that will be taking place after this race may yet be a hell above all others for the 1st years. Because they'll have to speak up after having exhausted themselves here.

However, you could say there's nothing else particularly noteworthy about it. Because despite Kouenji having a flair for the dramatic, I'm sure everyone else will be able to safely overcome this.

3

Just like that, our long exam day ended. The group, no, the entire student body is exhausted. Our group will definitely rank far higher than what we expected it to rank at the beginning.

As long as the average score favors us, our group will definitely stand more than a good chance. The rest depends on how well Nagumo's group and the 3rd year group perform.

At the very least we should be above the average. Just like our first day here, all the boys assembled inside the gymnasium. Afterwards, the girls also began assembling. The results of the special exam for both the boys and the girls will probably be announced now.

It's almost 5 o'clock in the evening. It'll probably be late night by the time we get back to the school.

"You all did well in the last eight days of this training camp. The contents of the exam are different of course, but this is a special exam that occurs every

few years. Overall, you all did better than the students who took this special exam last time. I suppose you could attribute that to all of you having better teamwork".

The elderly man I haven't seen before announced all that with a constant smile on his face. Looks like he's the one in charge of this training camp.

"First of all, I'll be announcing the results. For the boys, all groups are above the average set by the school and so there will be no expellees".

The moment that was announced, I could hear the boys breathe a sigh of relief.

"I see, so no expellees.....".

Patting himself on the chest, Keisei sighed. Ishizaki lightly taps him on the back.

"Never once thought we'd be expelled. Because we were aiming for 1st place after all".

"Yeah".

No matter what your feelings are, the fact that we've avoided expulsion is a significant one. However, something about the way that elderly man phrased it seemed off. If there are no expellees among the entire student body then there'd be no reason to say 'boys' in particular. In other words---

"As for the boys' group that placed first, I'll only be announcing the name of its 3rd year leader. For the 1st, 2nd and 3rd years of that group, your rewards will be handed out to you at a later date".

After explaining that, the elderly man slowly read the name.

"3rd year, Class C. Ninomiya Kuranosuke-kun's group placed first".

That announcement caused a portion of the 3rd years to celebrate. I didn't know which group it was for a moment, but I immediately realized that it's the

group the older Horikita is in.

It appears the older Horikita has dominated the battle against Nagumo.

"You did it, Horikita. As expected of you".

Afterwards, groups starting from 2nd place to last place were announced but for the seniors that's merely a bonus. Fujimaki, paying it no attention, praised the older Horikita.

"Oi, Yukimura. We're 2nd. We did it!".

"Yeah, that's a relief. That's really a relief".

I don't know by how much since they didn't announce the difference in points but Nagumo's in 2nd place. That means it was close but he lost. Even if he placed 2nd, it still means Nagumo lost so he'd somewhat quiet down. That's what everyone thought. To be honest, I couldn't tell whose tactics would triumph in this fight. Why? Because I wasn't particularly interested in it.

However, Nagumo's been smiling constantly beside me without showing any sign of being agitated.

This isn't a man who defiantly made his challenge and lost. I suppose that's to be expected. Because this man's been doing something ridiculously 'wicked' behind the scenes.

"1st place secured. Congratulations, Horikita-senpai. As expected of you".

Nagumo raised his voice and congratulated the older Horikita. The older Horikita neither replied nor celebrated, remaining silent for the remainder of the announcement.

No, perhaps he's starting to feel something off about this.

"You lost, Nagumo".

The 3rd year Fujimaki, who knows nothing, said that to Nagumo. Perhaps he feels like he's just humbled an upstart junior.

"Let's see, the result announcement has just begun".

"Oh please, the fight's already over".

"Sure, it's over for the 'boys'".

"Boys? Girls have nothing to do with this. Nagumo, that was the rule, right?".

"Yes, they have nothing to do with this. Nothing to do with my fight against Horikita-senpai, that is".

Fujimaki's expression turned grim upon hearing those cryptic words from Nagumo. He quietly observed Ishikura from the 3rd years' Class B from beside him.

"Now then.....next up I will be announcing the results of the girls' groups. The group in 1st place is the group led by 3rd year Class C's Ayase Natsu-san".

This time around, a portion of the girls start celebrating. The small group that's a part of the 3rd year Ayase's large group is the one built around Class C's Horikita and Kushida. They may have just won quite a lot of points for themselves. But after the joy comes the problem.

"Umm.....this is truly unfortunate but there is one small group that has fallen below the average".

Both the boys and the girls froze up at that announcement. The students who were celebrating also went silent.

Everyone did their best in the special exam and worked hard to ensure they'd be above the average. However, the results can sometimes be cruel. This would mean someone's definitely going to be expelled.

The question is whether it's going to be a 1st year or a senior student, or perhaps both. There's no telling yet. The older Horikita looked at Nagumo as

though he just realized something.

As though he's trying to figure out the reason behind that constant warped smile on his face. But it's already too late.

"Firstly, I'll announce the lowest group...it's the group led by 3rd year Class B's Ikari Momoko-san".

The boys all couldn't tell who was in that group at first. But they could hear screams coming from some of the girls and they start to realize who belongs to that group. The bottom large group has been decided. Now it all rests on which small group fell below the average.

In the worst case scenario, there could be expellees from all three years at once.

"Now, as for the group that fell below the average.....".

Silence fell upon the gymnasium almost as though we were in the midst of Zazen. Everyone, wanting to know the results as quickly as possible, focused on that man's mouth.

"Same as before, 3rd year---".

He read it out. And the gymnasium was divided into those who are starting to break out into a smile and those who are starting to get nervous.

"The group's leader is---Ikari Momoko-san. That is all".

The moment that was declared, Nagumo started laughing happily as though he had been restraining himself all this time.

Time that passed like we were in slow motion resumed again.

But a lot of the students have yet to comprehend the situation. Nagumo isn't laughing because some student whose face he doesn't even know just got expelled. All this means is that a student from the 3rd years' Class B got expelled, that's all...but he's laughing because that isn't all there is to it.

"What did you do, Nagumo!?".

The 3rd year Fujimaki from Class A approached him as though he just realized what's going on. The older Horikita didn't follow suit but his expression turned grim.

"The announcement is still ongoing, senpai. Please calm down. Currently this has nothing to do with you, Fujimaki-senpai. A Class B got expelled, that's all. In fact, isn't it great that a rival of yours has fallen?".

He answered with a scornful laugh.

"Umm, please remain silent. This is truly unfortunate but in taking responsibility, Ikari-san will have to be expelled. Furthermore, since the group can opt to go with joint responsibility, please consult me at a later. Moving on, I'll announce which girls' group took 1st place".

Despite saying how unfortunate it was, the announcements continued on solemnly. However, the older Horikita no longer cared about having taken 1st place. He got caught up in it just the way he was meant to be. It's precisely because he's an outstanding and exemplary person that he got beaten by Nagumo Miyabi. An unexpected attack.

"Ayanokouji, why is Fujimaki-senpai so angry...? Like Nagumo-senpai said, the leader's a student from Class B. Isn't that great news for Class A?".

Keisei whispered his doubts into my ear.

"No, it's not about the leader. I think it's about who's going to get dragged down along with her".

"Ehh?".

We were ordered to disband and while they prepare the bus for the return trip, we are allowed free time to change our clothes. Nagumo stood boldly and called over a single girl.

"Ikari-senpai, please tell us. Everyone's curious to know who you're going to be dragging down with you".

Ikari, from the 3rd years' Class B and slated for expulsion, appears calm. On the contrary, the ones worried are the girls who share a group with her.

Ikari's group consists mainly of Class Bs and Class Ds. There's no doubt about it, since it's information given by Asahina and Kei.

Also, among them.....there's also the figure of the sole participant from Class A, Tachibana Akane.

I looked at the older Horikita. And I then addressed him slowly in my mind.

I understand. In order to ensure your graduation as Class A, in order to act against Nagumo, you instructed the students of Class A, both boys and girls alike, to not let a single one end up as the leader right?

Because if you maintain a steady score, you won't be expelled after all. However, you knew that even that would not be an absolute defense.

That's why you accepted Nagumo's challenge and set the stage for a fair-and-square fight.

To hold 'malice' at bay.

And also you avoided making careless contact with the girls.

To lower the risk of Nagumo taking advantage of that opening and targeting the girls.

Amicably enough, you've exhausted all possible measures, I'll acknowledge that.

But even so, Nagumo's malice exceeds even that.

There's no need to even talk about it at length. This special exam is a trap that

Nagumo set without the school even realizing it.

The people caught in the trap are now beginning to realize their situation.

Their expressions, even now, have paled to the point it seems like they're about to collapse.

"Isn't that obvious? You disturbed our group's peace, Class A's Tachibana Akane-san".

As though to let everyone hear, Ikari spat that out aggressively.

"Nagumo.....the promise made with Horikita was that we wouldn't involve a third party in this right!?".

Fujimaki closes in, looking like he's going to punch someone.

"Hold on please. I have nothing to do with this".

"Shameless!".

It's obvious he'd get angry. No matter who looks at it, he's involved, is the mood of transparency he's creating himself.

"Then, I'll be issuing the mutual fall notice".

Saying that indifferently, Ikari headed over to the teachers.

At the same time, Ikari's classmate Ishikura also followed as though they were sticking together.

Nobody could bring themselves to recognize that.

That includes the Hashimoto faction too.

"Tachibana-senpai slowed down Ikari-senpai's group. As a result, the average score fell below the border, and she'll be dragged down too. Isn't it as simple as that?".

Unlike Fujimaki, the older Horikita called out to Tachibana, who was standing stock still, before approaching Nagumo.

A portion of the 3rd years left with helpless expressions.

"Horikita-kun, I'm sorry.....!".

"Tachibana, why didn't you consult me earlier? You should have been able to notice the abnormality".

"That's.....because I knew it would only burden Horikita-kun.....".

Tachibana apologizes while in tears.

In all likelihood she didn't notice it at first. The fact that the trap was sprung from the moment the groups were established.

However, with the passage of time she must have felt it. The fact that the group she's in is a group that's meant to drag down 'Tachibana'.

And Tachibana challenged the exam, hoping for a miracle. However, as expected, reality is cruel.

But Tachibana too, should have resolved to accept this as well. That even if she herself were to be expelled, it would end with the loss of just 100 class points.

"Beautiful friendship, or perhaps love would be a better fit. Congratulations, Horikita-senpai. Once again, please let me give my compliments. It's my loss".

Nagumo gave his compliments in a tone that hardly sounds like a loser's speech. There probably isn't a single person who would accept them gratefully.

"A fantastic idea, no, shall I say it was a strategy that was beyond the norm? There isn't a single person capable of reading me. Horikita-senpai, that includes you too".

Laughing heartily, Nagumo did not let up the attack on his injured opponent.

"Please do tell me, Tachibana-senpai. Carrying out your duties as part of the

student council, and so close to your graduation as Class A of the 3rd years, how exactly does it feel to be expelled? Also Horikita-senpai, what are your current feelings? Surely you're consumed by a feeling of irritation you haven't felt before?".

Having those words directed at him, the older Horikita silently breathes out.

"Why didn't you target me?".

"Even if I were to use a strategy like this against you, senpai, I've never considered expelling you. You could have stopped me with a strategy unforeseen and I was scared of that. But more than that, it's not like I ever thought I wanted to expel you, Horikita-senpai. On the contrary, if you were to be expelled, we wouldn't be able to meet anymore would we? And that's why when I picked one out of many, it ended up being Tachibana-senpai. I wanted to see what kind of face you'd make when I got rid of her".

He then laughed as though saying it was just curiosity, pure interest.

"My policies differed from yours but I did trust you. Regarding our competition, I thought you to be the kind of man capable of facing me head-on. Looks like I was wrong".

Nagumo did not flinch in response to those words from Horikita.

"Trust is similar to experience points. You accumulate them and it gradually grows bigger and bigger. Its ultimate form, I believe, is family. If you're out at night and you encounter a stranger, you'd be cautious. Yet if they turned out to be family then you'd let your guard down entirely. I'd say it's something similar to that. During these two years, even though I'm certain Horikita-senpai did not like me, I did gain a certain degree of your trust. Our values were different but it's all because I made good on my promises. In regards to our relationship, I obeyed your instructions and kept the rules. But even so, we're talking about a

senpai as sharp as you, it's not like you trusted in me 100% right?".

He should know at least that the older Horikita had given instructions for defense as well as the fact that he had been gathering information.

"But.....even if you doubted me, it's not like you can afford to take the initiative in betraying me, senpai".

It's one of the harsh points of nonaggressive defense.

"Because of that one curiosity you held, you've lost big time, Nagumo".

"Things like trust, I've thrown them aside myself. In order to be understood by the senpai who cares for his kouhais".

Keeping promises and having kept promises.

Nagumo easily painted over such foundations.

Trust and respect. To desire a fight that demolishes such fences. This is a challenge from Nagumo, who thinks that way.

"I've managed to understand your *modus operandi* well".

"That's a relief. Because this is, at the very most, a mere skirmish still".

Saying that, Nagumo asks.

"If necessary, I just have to expel as many people as needed. That is the original *modus operandi* of this school".

"You seem to be continuing this conversation on the assumption that Tachibana will be expelled".

While his surroundings were panicking, the older Horikita alone calmly proceeded with the conversation.

"W-Wait, Horikita-kun!".

Tachibana screams.

But the older Horikita's eyes already showed a firm resolve.

"Heh. I figured it'd be a tie but are you really going to spit that out? With this timing, that large amount of money and class points, I mean".

Cancellation of expulsion.

As long as the criteria are met, it's the ultimate method available for use by anyone.

"Please stop, I beg you. My uselessness is my own responsibility.....that's why----".

Tachibana desperately tried to stop him.

However, it seems Fujimaki also shares the same opinion as the older Horikita, as he spoke to the students of Class A.

"Up until now, the reason why Class A was able to function as Class A is something the people in the class understand better than anyone else. Isn't that right?".

"That's exactly right, Horikita. No need to hold back, use it, use it".

His Class A classmates said that at the same time.

"Is that really ok, Horikita-senpai? For the 3rd years to 'save' an expellee with this timing means Class A would have to give up their seat you know?".

"Even if we have to give it up once, we just have to take it back again. Using the modus operandi of this school you mentioned".

"Is that so? Well, I suppose that's fine too".

In all likelihood, from this point onwards, Miyabi will pleasantly discuss the strategy he himself formulated.

There's no need for me to listen to something I already know without even needing to ask.

I took my distance as though to leave this place. It's because there's nothing I can do even if I stayed here any longer.

Horikita was anxiously observing the situation, the whole story.

She was staring at her brother so intently she didn't even notice my existence.

As I left the gymnasium without paying any mind to it, Kei was standing by the side of the entrance as though she had been waiting for me.

As I walked through the corridor, she started walking after me with a slight delay.

"It turned out exactly how Kiyotaka said it would. You seriously knew. That Tachibana-senpai would be targeted. Even though if we're talking about expulsions, anyone other than Horikita-senpai could have fit the bill.....".

"The rules for this special exam. As soon as I heard the student council was involved in their conception and formation, I thought that. Certainly anyone could have fit the bill if we're talking about being targeted. But after going to the trouble of setting up this large scale trap. If he intends on giving a far more effective performance then the targets for that would be a limited few. The only female student who's had extensive contact with him would be Tachibana after all".

That was the conclusion I reached after connecting the dots from the information I acquired from Kei, Ichinose and Asahina.

The miraculous harmony between Nagumo and Ishikura from Class B of the 3rd years clearly hinted at the connection between the two.

Nagumo's taken under his wing not just the entirety of the 2nd years but also the non-Class A 3rd years.

"The large groups all colluded together to come up with low scores and the members of the group that Tachibana belonged to must have been considerably holding back as well. By doing so, it's an easy task to delineate the border".

Was how I explained it but it seems like there's still something Kei isn't convinced of.

"But why did you use Class B? Even though it'd have been perfectly fine to have a student from Class D be the leader. Because you used Class B, ultimately Horikita-senpai's still Class A right? If you wanted to drag him down to Class B isn't that what you should have done?"

Kei's viewpoint is a good one. Certainly, that's exactly right.

If I'm going to carry out this strategy with resolve then I should have had the leader be a student from Class D and lessened the gap between Class A and Class B that way. Is what I'd have considered normally.

"It's precisely because it's Class B that this was possible. If Tachibana were to complete the special exam's assignments flawlessly then it wouldn't be a simple task dragging her down. Unless the other three classes, excluding A, join hands, it's not a viable trap. Consider Class D, who's probability of making it to Class A is the lowest one at the moment, in order to ascend even by one class they may decide, at the very last moment, to drag down students from Class C or Class B. But if a student from Class B were to become the leader, that absolutely won't be the case. Because it would be pointless to drag down students from a lower class at a time like this".

On the other hand, looking at it from Class D or Class C's perspective, if it

would result in the students from Class A and Class B being expelled and them crumbling down, then naturally they'd happily cooperate.

And Ikari's group, sharing a mutual destination, thoroughly laid the blame on Tachibana.

If anything happened, they probably harassed her maliciously. Tachibana was left unable to sleep at night from the commotion.

As a result of obeying Tachibana's instructions, their grades did not improve. If you look only at the results of the special exam, despite it being mediocre, if they can frame her as having pulled their leg for the entire week then that'll be more than enough to drag her down.

If there were pleas, then they would deliberate but if the entire small group collude together to assert that she had obstructed them in places where no one would see then there'd be no choice but to recognize that.

Of course, it would set a malicious precedent but the outdoor school's special exam that will be taking place in a few years time should have some amendments made to its rules anyways.

And just like that, Nagumo's elaborate strategy ensared her and succeeded in carrying out measures towards Tachibana's expulsion.

".....but, like, how could he even come up with a strategy like this. If I were a Class B student, I absolutely wouldn't be able to stand being expelled for the sake of my comrades. Where's the reward in that?"

"I don't know what exactly the reward is but at the very least, Ikari won't be expelled".

"Ehh? But, she's the leader right?"

"They probably predicted that the older Horikita would utilize that. 20 million points and 300 class points. If they're paid, you can cancel the expulsion. In other words, you can extend a lifeline. It's because he'll be utilizing that".

"Somehow, I can't tell if that's a gain or not. Rather, wouldn't it be a loss?".

"It's a blow having to spend class points but if Class A too, extends a lifeline, then a gap won't form. Compared to that, they won't sustain any damage as far as private points go".

"Does that mean the 3rd years' Class B is just that rich?".

"No. The absolute condition that comes with Nagumo proposing this strategy would be that he'll pay all the private points. If he won't do even that then they probably won't even cooperate with him".

Probably, on the bus, Nagumo made contact with Ishikura and paid him 20 million points in advance. The proof lies in Ikari, who's always calm, and Ishikura who acts alongside that Ikari.

"The 2nd years are united. If he raises money from the entirety of the 2nd years then he wouldn't even need 50,000 points per person. Saving one expellee wouldn't even be expensive".

"What a messed up way of fighting. That's absolutely not normal".

"That's how Nagumo Miyabi operates, is what it is".

He didn't think of the strategy after seeing the exam. He thought of the strategy first before creating the exam.

Class A, led by the older Horikita, would have to pay a total of 20 million private points as a single class.

You could say that it's an extreme amount of damage.

Before one or two special exams which would likely occur prior to graduation, they had lost a tremendous amount of money.

If the older Horikita were to be expelled in the next exam, then in all likelihood, he wouldn't have enough money left for himself.

The lifeline would misfire.

"We should split up".

"One more thing, please tell me just one more thing".

Perhaps there's still something she's curious about, as Kei stopped me.

"Nagumo-senpai's way of thinking, it seems like there's no way to stop the method he used to drive Tachibana-senpai to expulsion. How should I put it, a perfect trap? Is that why Kiyotaka didn't make a move?".

"There's no doubt that it's quite a formidable strategy. It's already pretty much checkmate the moment he makes the enemy walk into it".

He set a good precedent that private points can become powerful weapons.

"If I happened to be in a situation similar to Tachibana-senpai's.....? If it's a situation where even a lifeline can't be used? As I thought, at a time like that, wouldn't it be impossible to do anything?".

Kei asks me that softly.

"You don't even need to hear my reply, you already know don't you? I won't let you get expelled. No matter what method I have to use".

After that, Horikita Manabu paid the class points and private points that Class A possessed and chose to extend a lifeline to Tachibana Akane.

And just as I had predicted, Class B's Ishikura also extended a lifeline to Ikari.

An unusual scenario where two classes exercised the right to utilize a lifeline at the same time occurred. And also from this point onwards, one after another, expulsions will occur in the Advanced Nurturing High School from all school years.

Afterword

Next time for sure, harboring those feelings in my heart whilst giving a premature announcement of the release date yet being entirely delayed. Kinugasa here.

Now that my declaration's off by this much, even I can't help but feel that this is strange.

I should have been able to release it already, I should be able to release it already yet each and every time there's always a delay from my preliminary announcements.

It's terrible!

I shall hereby declare in no uncertain terms that I will no longer state the release date in my afterwords.

It's been roughly 7~8 weeks since I hurt my fingers.....that much time has passed and yet I'm still far from making a complete recovery.....

I am receiving treatment while I am progressively taking care of myself and wondering if I can somehow maintain the 4 month pace I've kept up until now.

Still, by the time I realized it's already May.

Time really flies, doesn't it?

It's went by rather quickly considering it's almost 3 whole years since Youkoso Jitsuryoku Shijou Shugi no Kyoshitsu e was first released.

At first, during volume 1, there were times when I hadn't expected to still be selling and writing this and so I am extremely happy but these days it's not just my fingers but my whole body that's creaking at the joints. I am keenly aware of that.

Truly, I shall exercise caution.

It'll only be for a bit but I'll touch on the contents of volume 8 as well.

Youjitsu volume 8 is a story where senior students appear one after another.

From good-for-nothing senior students to suspicious senior students, even unreliable senior students will be appearing extensively.

It would be great if you enjoyed this volume too.

Now about volume 9, umm, in other words, in S-S-Sep-September it will be releas.....gu, gugigi, no, I've already decided I won't be making that statement! Halt!

I'll cut it out with the childishness.....

Personally speaking, there's one thing I've always wanted.

Call it a desire of mine but I want a massage chair. I really, really want one.

But it's expensive.

Furthermore, since it takes up space, I won't have the space to fit it in my house.

The early years where worries continue.

In the end I can't make a decision. Will the day I purchase one come or won't

it?

Well, no matter how much time passes I'll just be fantasizing this and that and I won't end up buying it though.

If there's anyone who knows of a wonderful massage chair, please do tell me.

Ichinose SS: Weariness of the Heart

"I'm exhausted".

After splitting up with Asako-chan and the others, I leaned on the wide table in the cafeteria with my upper body.

It felt like all the fatigue I had accumulated during the day just faded away. It'd be great if I fell asleep just like this.

I closed my eyes and thought so.

No, no. If I fall asleep in a place like this, I'd be inconveniencing the others. But my eyelids are already so heavy.

When I tried my best to open them again, Ayanokouji-kun was reflected in my eyes.

At a surprisingly close distance.

I abruptly raised my upper body and called out to him.

"Ayanokouji-kuuuun yaho~".

"You were having a good time".

Apparently he's overheard my conversation with Asako-chan and the others.

"Girls' chats may or may not be their source of power".

Perhaps I have't been sufficiently charged yet, but I just didn't have the strength and had to use the table as a replacement pillow.

Since Ayanokouji-kun had a flabbergasted look on his face, I added.

"Ahh, can't I do this?".

It may have been too rude an attitude to take when speaking to another person...

"It's normal to do something like that when you're tired".

He did seem surprised but he gave his consent.

"Sorry---. For making it slightly uncomfortable".

"It's become quite the difficult group, hasn't it?".

"It was difficult until we formed this current group, is perhaps how I should put it. Girls know very well what they like and dislike, or more like, there are more than a few girls who are willing to say they don't like another girl straight to their face. In that regard, when it comes to personal feelings, aren't they a lot of boys who like to muddy the waters?".

Well, I've heard my fair share of quarrels breaking out over the small details though. If I can hear a variety of things from Ayanokouji-kun, then I'd like to collect information.

"Ryuuen's openly disliked though".

"It's bad to laugh at that but that really couldn't be helped, could it? But isn't Ryuuen-kun tired too? To be disliked by everyone must be tiring".

It would've been just fine if he had connected with others more in order to get along with them.

Even if he turns over a new leaf now, wouldn't it be difficult to make things go well?

"Don't get too fired up".

Perhaps he was being considerate of me, as Ayanokouji-kun quickly got up

from his seat.

Doesn't seem like I'll be able to draw information out of him but that can't be helped.

I too, felt like relaxing on my own anyways.

"It's fine, it's fine. Being energetic is about the only thing I have going for me. See you later, Ayanokouji-kun".

Besides, either way all I can do when it comes to an exam like this is to tackle it seriously.

A special exam where I'll have to join hands with people other than my classmates isn't really one I can do anything about.....

How should I put it, if I increase the number of things I have to protect I'll end up being unable to keep up with it all.

Someone who'd normally be my enemy becomes my ally. Something like that means that someday, my enemy now may end up as my ally.

If something like that were to happen, then sooner or later I might just burst.

I thought that while looking at Ayanokouji-kun's back as he went away.

".....so they've climbed up to Class C. Even though all I've heard of are Horikita-san's accomplishments.....".

Ayanokouji-kun, who's always positioned perfectly.

Exactly how much influence he exerts is still a complete unknown.

But---there are only a few people who know the fact that I possess a massive sum of points.

Did a student from Class B leak it, or could it be.....Ayanokouji-kun?

I'll have to ascertain that soon enough.

If he happened to be someone superior to Horikita-san then it means that he may be a threat to Class B, which I must protect.

Kei SS: A Teasing Partner

Soon after the outdoors school began, I received a request from Kiyotaka and committed myself to understanding the girls' group.

And now today, I could see Kiyotaka at last.

Kiyotaka looked at me once.

I immediately understood.

The fact that he's going to be making contact with me now.

And I could feel him sitting behind me.

"hnn---".

I sent him a signal by purring so I could let Kiyotaka know I noticed him without being noticed by my friends and my surroundings to my left and right.

And then I proceeded to unreservedly chat with my friends to my heart's content.

If I do something disruptive, it would cast suspicion on me. Then about three minutes later, I succeeded in going back ahead by saying I had an appointment with another girl.

"So? Finally feel like relying on me on the third day?"

I called out to Kiyotaka, who sat behind me. However, I didn't turn around to look that easily.

At times like this, female spies don't act foolishly.

"That's about right. There's far too little information on the girls".

These days, Horikita-san seems a bit distant too. I'm the only person in the

class he can depend on.

I was extremely happy that deep down inside, Kiyotaka relied on me as though clinging to me.....no, no. What's the matter with me? Being delighted that I'm being worked to the bone.

"Well, it can't be helped right? For someone with a communication disorder like you, there are only a few girls you could possibly make contact with".

But I acted bullishly, just a bit, to tease him.

"Then even without my advice, you can overcome this special exam?".

I received that counter punch from him.

I should have taken the advantage but with that one blow, I was left reeling.

"O-Of course. Who do you think I am?".

I made a bluff, but without a doubt, the fact that I was shaken by it must have been conveyed to Kiyotaka.

"I see. Then there's nothing to fear".

I can handle the rest myself? I received that sort of pressure and so I gave in.

If I ever got into a pinch, it's not like I can do anything about it on my own.

".....later, at least analyze my situation to see if there's any danger or not, ok?".

I meekly(?) asked that of him.

"For now, let's hear it starting from the partitioning of the girls' groups".

"Ahh, before we talk about that there's something that's been bugging me".

"Let's keep it brief".

Of course I understand. I don't want anyone to start paying attention to Kiyotaka by messing up.

"It's something pretty important.....or more like, what's going on with that Ryuuen guy?".

"Are you concerned?".

"I mean, yeah. It's become a topic even among the girls. Why that guy stopped being the leader but it doesn't look like anybody knows the truth though".

There's no way I wouldn't be curious about what's going on with the man who did all those horrible things to me.

"Being as meek as a lamb, that expression doesn't quite fit Ryuuen but right now it looks like he's acting quite mature".

"Does that mean your chastisement worked?".

"Chastisement, eh?".

For the foreseeable future, I won't be targeted by that man.

I was truly happy about that.

"Don't worry about Ryuuen. He won't act carelessly. At the very least, I can say that he won't do anything to Kei from now on".

Buu!

A surprise attack. He called me 'Kei'.

Since I'm still not used to him calling me by my first name, I unexpectedly panicked.

But, it's lame panicking over something like being called by your first name.

I stabilized my breathing.

".....sorry, that was nothing".

I gave that excuse and returned to our conversation.

"That didn't seem like nothing, Kei".

He called me by my first name again. Every time, my poor heart takes a giant leap. Then, after a few seconds, it begins beating rapidly.

"I-I'm telling it's nothing".

Calm down, calm down Kei. I'm not a woman who's moved just because she got called by her first name.

I'm a popular gyaru who can easily overcome trivial things like that.

Still, even though he didn't refer to me that way that much up until now, why's he calling me that consecutively?

"Is that true, Kei?".

The 3rd time honestly confirmed to me that I am being teased.

".....hold it right there. You're doing it on purpose!".

I wanted to turn around, but I can't.

Because more important than the fact that our surroundings would notice us is the fact that I'm aware my face is beet red.

"Ahh, mou. Really, I shouldn't have given you permission to call me by my first name.....".

Even though I wanted to see him off while hiding my face, I can't quite do that at the cafeteria.

The pain of having to play the part of the girl slowly eating her meal.

"You're the one who called me out here in the first place though".

"Yeah. That can't be helped".

Can't be helped.....is a lie though.

The one who falls in love loses.

I don't know who said it, but I think it's a clever saying.

Nazuna SS: That 1st Year Boy

That meeting took place while I was on my way back to the cafeteria from the toilet.

"Hmm?".

When I passed by that boy, I heard that voice. Could it be that he's talking to me?

As I pondered over whether or not to stop walking, that boy called out to me.

"Ahh, I'm sorry. I just thought I've seen that amulet before a while back. Please don't mind me".

That boy said such a thing. Just as I thought I'd seen him before somewhere, he turned out to be the 1st year that Miyabi talked to a while back.

If I recall, he fought well against Horikita-senpai during the relay.

A pitiful boy who attracted attention because of that, was the impression I somehow had of him.

"This amulet isn't in stock at the school anymore though".

I doubt this is the case but could he be hitting on me while putting on that naive face of his?

"Is that so? By any chance, did you happen to drop this amulet somewhere a while back?".

"Could it be.....you're the one who picked up my amulet?".

"I wonder. I picked it up on my way back during the winter vacation though.....".

I had dropped my amulet somewhere and had given up on it. I felt grateful towards the person who picked it up and so I felt ashamed of having imagined something rude.

"I don't believe I'm mistaken. I see, so it was you".

I went up to the boy and showed him my amulet.

Perhaps it's because he immediately handed it over, since he hadn't realized it.

"This amulet is something I bought in this school. So it's not like I have any strong attachment in particular to it. It's just, how should I put it, it's like my mental support? When I have this in hand I feel really at peace. That's why when I lose it, it feels like an omen that bad things are going to happen and that makes me anxious. That's why I was really happy knowing someone picked it up and handed it over".

Unconsciously, I ended up talking about unrelated things but this should be enough.

"To think the person who picked it up would be you".

This too, might be called a strange, chance meeting. Or more like, it may be something along the lines of destiny.

This amulet protects its owner and at the same time, is the harbinger of destiny.

It's not just about romance but also brings people together.

Perhaps there might just be a meaningful destiny both he and I share.

Maybe that's why I happened to drop the amulet.

Thinking that, I began to feel like cherishing this bizarre and precious destiny.

That's right.

For me, this was how I met Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun. The day destiny reared its head.

Sakayanagi SS 1: The true meaning is

That boy walking towards me did so while looking away.

I could easily see that he was engaged in a pleasant chat with his friends and thus was neglecting what is in front of him.

At this rate, we will collide.

However, even someone with handicapped legs like me can still adjust my course sufficiently enough considering my positioning.

But there are times when my legs would hurt and it's harder than usual to get them to move.

And that happened to be now.

That is why I had no choice but to choose the option of calling out to him.

"Umm---please look out?".

However my voice was drowned out by the boys' laughter.

Disregarding the fact that I had worked out a measure to avoid them a second time, it was rendered ineffective.

Since it's come to that, I don't feel like coming up with a third proposal.

I made up my mind and braced for the conclusion that would follow shortly after.

Sure enough, the boy did not notice me and his shoulder, with some force, hit me.

I tried to endure it but there was no way it would go swimmingly and all I could manage was to sit down right there as though collapsing.

"Sorry, sorry. Are you ok?".

The name of the boy who noticed me for the first time after running into me was Yamauchi Haruki. A student of Class C.

For the record, I do keep that information in mind but as far as I'm concerned, he's an insignificant existence.

"Yes...no need for concern".

I did not take the hand that was extended to me, rather, I used the wall to slowly get back up.

"Then, umm, I'll be off?".

Yamauchi-kun ended it with a single, non-serious apology.

In a sense, you could say he's a pleasant boy.

"Yes. Please don't concern yourself with me".

As I replied politely like that, Yamauchi-kun immediately returned to chatting with his friends and walked off.

"Really though, Sakayanagi-chan is cute but isn't she clumsy?".

Despite not having taken much distance from me yet, without even knowing that he's being overheard, Yamauchi-kun left behind such words and disappeared.

He probably didn't see all of it, but it appears Ayanokouji-kun too, has been observing my interaction with him.

I ended up letting him see something unsightly.

"Are you alright?".

"Thank you for your concern but it's not a big deal".

"I'll give Yamauchi an earful later".

"It's not like he deliberately did it, I only fell once at most".

However, now that I have fallen once, it also means I have gained the right to make him fall too.

"Well then, please excuse me".

Sooner or later, I'll have to deliver a special gift to him.

Sakayanagi SS 2: That Summer Day

Early February. Just when I could feel the breath of spring. I held a warm can of coffee in my hands. Since the can happens to be very hot, I took out my handkerchief and wrapped it around the can.

"Hey, I want to hear it upfront".

"Ara. What might the matter be?".

While watching me, Masumi-san said so.

"You seem to be carrying around quite a lot of stuff but isn't that brown handkerchief for boys?".

"Does it not suit me?".

"To be honest, no".

"I don't really dislike how Masumi-san's not one to mince words".

I laughed thinly and glanced at the handkerchief. Certainly, it's a very plain and simple one meant for boys that it's hard to say I'd normally be interested in it.

"This is not mine. So it's no surprise it doesn't suit me. Shall I say it's something I borrowed?".

"Borrowing a handkerchief.....what's with that? Isn't that a bit creepy?".

"Fufu. Maybe".

"But you're laughing.....".

I first encountered this handkerchief before I enrolled at the Advanced Nurturing High School. Let's go back to when I was a 3rd year in middle school

and the summer vacation of that time.

Calling it a summer adventure, I got onto a train alone and travelled to a sea far away. A place I used to visit many times as a child but grew apart from as I grew older. Since I can't swim, it's a place I had no business being at. I used to think that in those days but now that I've enrolled in high school, that's become a fond memory for me.

I realized that there's plenty of value even in simply admiring the rippling waves of the sea. But I realize too that a cripple like me would find it difficult to walk down the beach and so I settled for gazing at it from the paved road along the coast. To protect myself from the blazing summer sun, I made sure to wear a white hat.

However---

"Ahh-----".

Not too long after that, along with a breeze, the white hat I had been wearing flew off into the sky. I panicked and reached out but a cripple like myself couldn't possibly reach it and it flew towards the beach.

".....a mischief of the wind, I suppose? There's no other choice then".

That hat is a precious belonging of mine that my father bought for me. I need to go pick it up somehow.

I decided to take a detour down to the beach while bathing directly in the sun's rays that I'm not used to. However, the blazing sun sapped away more of my strength than I had expected.

"Honestly.....I'm no good when it comes to doing anything physical".

Feeling very dizzy, I collapsed as soon as I arrived at a bench with a roof over it near the lighthouse.

Even at this very moment, my hat may be blown further out to sea. That was

what I thought but my body simply won't listen to me. Then let's have a short break.

I thought that and decided to cool myself down on the bench. I wonder how much time's passed since then. I felt a cool sensation on my neck and opened my eyes. It would appear I fell asleep.

The fact that I've been walking long distances must be one of the causes of that.

".....this is.....".

Both my hat that had flown off and a wet handkerchief that had been placed on my neck were there.

To prevent the hat from flying off again, an unopened bottle of mineral water had been placed on the rim of the hat.

When I looked around, I saw a boy walking away alone. Judging from his physique and his height, he's my age or maybe slightly older. It would appear he's taken appropriate measures to guard against the risk of heatstroke but.....that boy left without even seeking any gratitude from me.

For some reason, his retreating back didn't seem familiar to me and so I eliminated that possibility.

Because there's no way 'he' could be here in the outside world.

"I want to see you.....Ayanokouji-kun".

I unconsciously whispered that.

I want to see him with my own eyes since I was only able to see him through the glass.

I want to hear his voice.

I want to touch him.

And then I want to break him.

I wonder what this emotion, this urge, filling my heart is. I'm sure the answer to that can only be found in making contact with Ayanokouji-kun.

Please.....I hope to meet you again someday.

While looking at that boy's back, I prayed.